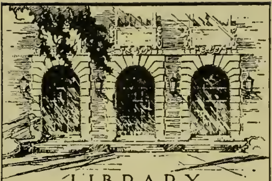

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THE MASTER OF MARTON.

VOL. I.

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THE MASTER OF MARTON.

"To thine own self be true."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO

E. T.,

WHO TAUGHT ME FIRST TO HAVE FAITH IN MYSELF,

I Dedicate this Book.

Gen. Res. Ray 12 P 51 Pickering 3v.

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THE FIRST VOLUME.

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THE MASTER OF MARTON.

CHAPTER I.

JANET BRANDE.

AN old brown-timbered house, large, low, and rambling, with stacks of tall clustered chimneys and weather-beaten gables shadowed by tangled masses of ivy, which, from the thick gnarled stems seen here and there among the glossy leaves, might be of an age almost coëval with the walls to which it clung. A quaint old place, pleasant, meditative, as it stood there in the August sunshine, with an air of having seen a good deal of life in its time, human joy and sorrow too, which gave it a peculiar idiosyncrasy of its own, such as one often sees in houses which have been for many generations in the occupation of a single family.

Tradition declared, and I believe in this case it was correct, that the Priory House had formerly been part of an ancient religious establishment, which, being dismantled and partially destroyed at the dissolution of the Monasteries, had remained in its dilapidated condition for more than a century and a half, at the end of which period it fell into the hands of an ancestor of the present occupant. The roof and upper part of the edifice had been broken down, but on the massive stone walls which still remained, its new owner erected the present roomy and substantial abode, which, with its buff-washed walls, its brown-tiled roof, its mullioned windows below and latticed casements above, often caught the eye of the traveller on the high-road between Bedesby and Marton.

At the time my history begins, there was standing in the large stone porch of this house a little maiden lady who had just given a brisk titillating knock at its oaken door. A cheery-looking person with a trim little figure and a round, good-tempered countenance, set off by clusters of small grey curls, arranged symmetrically on each side of her face. Altogether, as she stood there on that sunny afternoon, a pleasant specimen of that much maligned class, "old maids." For Miss Milly Gale was an old maid: there was no denying it, and she very wisely did not attempt to evade the fact by any of those transparent little artifices to which maiden ladies of an uncertain age are so apt to resort.

While she stands there, waiting for an answer to her neat little knock—everything about Miss Gale was neat and small—I may as well introduce her more fully to my readers, and having done so, we can enter the house in her company.

Miss Milly Gale was the youngest of seven portionless daughters of a neighbouring squire, each of whom, as they successively arrived at years of maturity, had been pushed by the force of circumstances out of the parent nest, some into the holy estate of matrimony, others—among whom was our little friend—into various situations as governesses, that being the only way in which young ladies of moderate acquirements, and no means to speak of, might help to lessen the family expenses without unduly lowering the family dignity.

Perhaps Miss Milly, being the last of the seven, might have been permitted to remain at home for an indefinite period, had it not chanced that the sister next above her was afflicted by an incurable affection of the spine, so that, for her, matrimony and teaching being alike out of the question, she was perforce obliged to assume the immunities of the youngest, while Milly obtained a most eligible situation as governess in the family of a worthy and well-to-do country gentleman, who was blessed with an easy-tempered young wife and a large family of small children.

Being endowed by Nature with a plain face, an active temperament, and a general faculty for making herself useful, together with an inexhaustible fund of kindness and good-humour, Miss Milly had succeeded in retaining her situation, first as governess, and latterly, after the death of the mother, as a sort of chaperon and companion, until, having relinquished her youngest charge into the hands of a husband, she found herself, on the verge of fifty, still Miss Milly Gale, with a retiring pension from her late master of fifty pounds per annum, which, with a snug little sum of her own saving, invested in the purchase of a Government annuity, brought her in just enough to live upon, as she said herself, in a quiet way—a very quiet way.

Miss Gale, however, eked out her scanty income by letting, during the summer months, her best parlour and bedroom to parties who came out from Bedesby or elsewhere to enjoy the country air in the pretty little village of Marton. And it was on behalf of a gentleman who had just come to lodge, or, as she termed it, "reside" with her, that she was making her present visit to the Priory House.

A clean middle-aged woman, in a white frilled cap, a blue cotton gown, and large checked apron, opened the door to Miss Gale, and ushered her into a large, low, oak-panelled room, with a bay window at one end, forming a deep recess, in which was seated a young girl, apparently about seventeen years of age. The thick tresses of rippling brown hair, warmed here and there into a rich russet hue by the sunlight which shimmered over them through the wind-waved boughs outside the window, hid her face as she bent it down over the piece of fine work that she held in her hands. She looked up, however, as Miss Gale entered the room, and then you saw a broad white forehead, a firm fine mouth, and a pair of large dark grey eyes, with long fringing lashes, whose shadowy depths you would fain explore did not a certain imperious light gleaming from under their level lids seem to defy you to continue your intrusive gaze.

"All alone, Miss Janet?" said the little maiden lady, coming briskly forward; "I thought you would have been rambling somewhere far away this bright afternoon. And how are your papa and your Aunt Mildred? Is she at home?"

"Papa is quite well, thank you. He is gone to Bedesby to a meeting there, and Aunt Mildred is not at home either," replied the girl. "She has gone down to the Hall to look after that little maid there, I suppose. Old Mrs. Grant has been sent for to see a sister who is ill, so she brought the keys here, and Aunt Mildred promised to go down now and then and see how things were going on."

"Dear me!" said Miss Gale, in a tone of concern. "I am sorry she is out. In fact, I came to ask her to allow the gentleman who has just come to reside with me to see over the Hall. I knew Mrs. Grant was away. She told me herself she was going, and said your aunt had been kind enough to take charge of things a little until she came back. You see Mr. Maudsley—that is the name of the gentleman—only came yesterday; and really, when he saw the old place—you know we have a very good view of it from my upstairs windows—he seemed so taken with it that I took the liberty of saying that I was sure Miss Brande would be very glad to let him see the inside if he were so disposed."

"Oh yes," replied Janet; "but I daresay she will be at home before long if you can wait. She set off before three, and it is past five now."

"Thank you," said Miss Gale. "And so you are left at home to keep house. Well, I always say there is nothing like young people learning to make themselves useful. And busy, too, I see—marking, is it? What beautiful handkerchiefs, and how nicely you are doing them! But, my dear, if you will excuse my saying it, I am afraid that cambric is trying your eyes, it is so very fine."

"Oh, no," said Janet, impatiently, yet winking away a tear as she spoke. "It is only trying my patience—such a waste of time," she continued, looking disconsolately at the pile of snowy cambric lying beside her on the window-seat. "Aunt Mildred has given me this dozen of handkerchiefs for a birthday present, and she will have me mark them all with my name in full, *Janet Brande*—eleven letters, besides the number and the date; and I could have written them all in ten minutes with marking ink, and they would have looked just as well, only Aunt Mildred would make me stitch them. She says I must learn to do woman's work properly."

"Well, my dear," responded Miss Gale, who was not without certain old-maidenly notions of her own, and had, moreover, a way of dispensing little titbits of minced wisdom among her young friends, a residuum probably from her governess career, "and I daresay she is quite right. You know it is so important, so very important, especially for young ladies, to be particular in little things."

"Oh, of course," answered Janet; "but so much of this 'woman's work,' as my aunt calls it, is so useless. What better will any one be for my spending the whole of this beautiful afternoon over these handkerchiefs? And so pleasant as it might have been, too," she continued, with a longing look into the sunny garden from which the perfumed breath of flowers and the rippling whispers of the breeze among the myriad quivering leaves of a clump of grey aspens strayed in at the open window. "I meant to have taken a book and gone down to the river-side there under the trees. And my birthday, too," she added, with a sigh.

"Your birthday!" exclaimed Miss Gale. "Dear me! to think that I should have forgotten it! But, now I think of it, it was on the 12th of August last year, so, of course, it must be the same now. I remember meeting

Mr. Harry Birney coming down this way with his gun over his shoulder, and a brace of birds which he was bringing here, and he said they were the first fruits of the season. Well, my dear, I am sure I wish you many happy returns of the day; and if I haven't brought you any little token of my good wishes, why, you must take the will for the deed. There are some beautiful Queen's Eyes left in my strawberry bed that would have been just the thing. However, it is no use remembering things when it is too late, you know. And so you are seventeen, Miss Janet. Dear me! only to think of it. Why, you are getting almost a woman, and when I came here to settle down you were a little thing no higher than my shoulder—so fond of play too, and always tearing your frock, I remember; indeed, almost more like a boy than a girl, if you will excuse my saying so, Miss Janet, though you have grown up such a personable young lady. Indeed," added the little lady, with an admiring glance on the fresh young form before her, "I may say, without flattery, which is a thing I have a decided objection to, a very personable young lady indeed."

And she was right; for though a critic, scanning the restless, impetuous young face, might have pronounced it to have hardly a single absolutely perfect feature in it, few looked upon it without stealing a second glance to ascertain whence its subtle attraction proceeded. Perhaps this charm lay chiefly in that rare gift of expression which, with unconscious eloquence, told so truthfully of the nature within—a nature quick to feel, to resent; strong to love, to hate, to suffer, and enjoy. You could tell, by just watching the play of her countenance as she spoke, that she had been dowered with that perilous gift, an impulsive, passionate heart, which it would take a great deal to fill, to quell, and to discipline, before it could become a source of satisfaction either to its owner or any one else. And yet you could not talk for five minutes to the girl without feeling somehow drawn to her, just as on a winter day people find themselves insensibly gathering round the fire which glows and sparkles on the hearth.

Janet, however, gave little heed to Miss Gale's encomium on her personal appearance. She was gazing out over the beechen hedge, which, like a living wall, shut in the old-fashioned garden, at the level line of the Wold hills, little pearly peeps of which appeared here and there between the trees.

"I wish I had been born a boy instead of a girl!" she exclaimed, pushing back the rippling brown hair from her forehead, while her eyes darkened with excitement; "I should have had something worth living for then. I should have gone to college; or, at least, if papa could not have afforded that, I might have learned a profession, or gone abroad, perhaps. Harry Birney has just gone to India, and he is only two years older than I am. I should have polished myself bright against something; anything would be better than to spend my life marking handkerchiefs. I would rather even learn a trade; it would at least be doing something."

"But, Miss Janet," interrupted Miss Gale, "you are not going to spend your life marking handkerchiefs; you must learn housekeeping, you know. Some of these days, perhaps, you will be having a house of your own to manage. And young ladies have not to look far for something to do when they get married!" added she, with a sagacious nod, which set the little grey curls all in a flutter.

"Married!" exclaimed Janet, turning round somewhat indignantly; "I never mean to marry any one I do not love, never. And there is no one in the whole world that I really care for, besides papa, of course, except Miss Alison Birney, and she is a woman—so I can't marry her."

Miss Gale opened her eyes rather wider than usual.

"My dear," she said, "what a very peculiar way of putting things! But do you know, now, I always fancied——"

Miss Gale's fancies, however, whatever they were, were destined to remain unrevealed, for Janet went on without noticing her words—

"Of course, there are a good many people that I like very much; but then, liking and loving are two very different things. Now I would do anything in the world for Alison Birney. I would mark handkerchiefs for her all day long, if she needed it," said she; this being the most elaborate form of self-denial that at the moment suggested itself to her, "even though she never knew it was I who did them; but I should not care to do the same for any one else."

"Ah! well, my dear, you will be changing your mind some of these days," said Miss Gale, with her merry little laugh. Notwithstanding her fifty years' experience of single blessedness, she still cherished the delusion common to most of her sisterhood, that, spite of its hidden pitfalls and briar-strewn paths, the estate of matrimony was one earnestly to be desired by all who had not yet attained to its honours.

Miss Gale was one who never disguised her sentiments, whatever they might be. Indeed, if she had made the attempt, I do not think she would have succeeded. She did not try, therefore, to depreciate the fruit which hung out of her reach by the vain pretence that the grapes were sour; but on all occasions she spoke and acted according to her honest conviction, that though under certain circumstances—such as her own, for instance—it was all very well to be an old maid, yet it was without doubt a great deal better to be a young wife.

"But, Miss Janet," she continued, perceiving that the moody expression did not vanish from the young girl's face, "I think surely you might find plenty to do if you tried."

"I daresay," answered Janet; "but then I have no motive for doing it. Papa never notices anything I do, he is always so wrapped up in his books and papers. I daresay he would do just as well without me as with me; and I believe I am nothing but a tease to Aunt Mildred. She is always making me cross by scolding me, and never tells me of anything but the faults in what I do; and yet I know there is a great deal of good in me, if only it could find its way out. But somehow I feel shut up every way, and it seems to get worse and worse. There does not seem anything worth living for. Just the same thing over and over again, and nobody to care about. I feel just like an engine of ever so many horse-power, and no steam on."

Poor Janet! It was an old experience, this of hers, and a very common one—one, perhaps, which most eager, sensitive natures feel more or less at times, as if the garment of the outer life were too strait and narrow to allow free play to the energies of the spirit within.

Life has many mysteries, many questions large as itself, which eternity alone will answer; this one, perhaps, not among the least—What becomes of all that latent power which lies stored up in so many natures, waiting only for that electric touch which to some perhaps may never come, to burst forth in irrepressible force, filling all life with light and love? Is it dissipated by the death of the body, or does it, with gathered strength, find scope for action in another life—a life in which no faculty shall lie dead, no power be unused?

Janet's words, however, suggested no metaphysical difficulty to her auditor; though, being of a very literal turn of mind, Miss Gale was somewhat puzzled by this figurative mode of expression. However, she gathered enough to make her understand that the young girl was fretting and chafing herself against some grievance or other, the nature of which she could not exactly comprehend.

Miss Gale never could see distress of any kind without making an effort to relieve it. If a ragged child tumbled down on the road before her, and announced its mishap by a lamentable roar, she was sure to pick it up, examine its grazed hands, and finally still its cries and comfort it by the present of a sugar-plum or two from the store which she always carried about with her to meet such emergencies. All the tenderness in her warm little breast welled forth at sight of the tears which Janet was vainly endeavouring to force back from her eyes. And yet, though she felt abundantly sorry for the motherless girl, she was quite at a loss for something to say which should just meet her case. She could not comprehend these wild struggles under an invisible yoke, these vague, unsatisfied longings, in the midst of what appeared, to her, very pleasant surroundings. Each day, as it came freighted with its simple duties, cares, and joys, brought with it enough to fill her own busy, bright little life; but the weary void of a large, half-empty heart was a thing of which Miss Milly Gale had never had experience.

Evidently her little sugar-plum consolations were insufficient for poor Janet's need, so instead of offering them, Miss Gale did the only thing which occurred to her, and perhaps the best thing she could have done; she got up from her seat, and going straight to Janet, pressed a warm kiss on her forehead, saying as she did so—

"My dear, I don't know about your being like a steam-engine, but I am quite sure you will always find people to love you if you will only let them."

Janet did not much relish such salutes in a general way, but there was so much genuine warmth in the little maiden lady's embrace, that it went straight to her heart, and soothed, though it did not still, the excitement of her feelings.

Neither was she given, girl as she was, to light up her heart for other people to inspect; but just now Miss Gale's cheery voice and kindly face had acted like the brass knob at the end of a conductor, when applied to a charged electrical machine. All the vague discontent and impatient longing which had been gathering strength amid the chafing and irritation of her monotonous life, and over which she had been brooding in silence, as the tedious afternoon hours crept by and left her still at her distasteful task, had suddenly found an outlet in speech, and hence the burst of mingled petulance and distress which had so bewildered the worthy little lady.

Perhaps Miss Gale might have proceeded to draw still further on her stock of wisdom and kindliness, in her good-natured attempts at consolation and encouragement, but at this moment the great oaken door opened and Janet's aunt made her appearance—a tall, spare woman, dressed with scrupulous neatness, in handsome, but somewhat old-fashioned attire. She had a keen, darting eye, which seemed engaged in incessant inspection of everything within its range, and gave to those in her presence the impression of living continually under a microscope. Yet there was a certain staid dignity in her voice and manner as she came forward to greet her guest, which accorded well with the ancestral look of the quaint oak-panelled room, with its antique furniture and faded hangings, and its old family portraits looking serenely down out of their dim and tarnished frames.

Perhaps a shrewd observer glancing at the blonde, thin face, with its high, narrow forehead, compressed lips, and somewhat diminutive nose and chin, might conclude that Miss Mildred Brande was not altogether a pleasant person to live with. Fidgety, no doubt, to a distressing degree, if not exactly severe, and certainly more given to criticize sharply what was amiss in the conduct of those around her, than by bland approval of what was right to stimulate them to increased exertions. Evidently she had come into the room now with something on her lips that would not wait for utterance, for no sooner had she shaken hands with Miss Gale than she turned at once towards her niece.

"Janet," said she, "where did you leave your gardening-gloves when you had done with them this morning? They are not in the drawer in the hall table. Just where you had been using them, I daresay. Now go and fetch them in directly, and put them in their proper place. How many times am I to reprove you for this carelessness about your things? And don't stand chattering to Graham either, he has enough to do without wasting his time talking to you. I suppose it was that made him so behindhand with his work this morning."

Janet rose slowly, her heart swelling with vexation. It was not pleasant certainly to be found fault with in company, even before little Miss Gale.

"How many of those handkerchiefs have you finished marking?" continued her aunt, as Janet laid down her work somewhat sullenly. "Only three, and you have had the whole of the afternoon to do them. There is a thread wrong in this B," she pursued, after a careful inspection; "the whole of the letter must come out, and it spoils work so to unpick it. Really, Janet, you would try any one's patience, you would, indeed. You seem as if you could not do a single thing properly, unless some one was looking over your shoulder the whole of the time. If you were but half as fond of anything really useful as you are of your painting and singing that you waste so much time over, how much better it would be!"

Janet listened in silence to her aunt's reproof, somewhat in doubt as to the inherent utility of fine cross-stitch; and then, without speaking, went to look for the missing gloves, glad of the excuse to make her escape.

Her aunt called her back.

"Janet," said she, "go up-stairs when you come in, and make your hair a little smoother. You have been sitting by that open window until the wind has made it quite untidy. And don't loiter, for it is nearly six o'clock. Miss Gale will stay and have tea with us, I daresay. Pray do," she continued, turning as she spoke to the little maiden lady, who, though nothing loth to accept the invitation, thought it only becoming to make one or two ineffectual protestations. And under cover of these poor Janet managed at last slip out of the room.

⁂

CHAPTER II.

BALDER, THE SUN-GOD.

"WHERE is Janet?"

But Janet was nowhere to be found, although Miss Mildred looked into her brother's study, peeped in at the little breakfast-room, into the plant-room, or "conservatory," as some people would have termed it, unlocked the drawing-room door, and looked in there, and finally went upstairs and called her niece's name so shrilly, that if she had been anywhere at hand, she must certainly have heard.

"Miss Janet's gone down to the water-side, ma'am," said Hannah, running out of her kitchen at the sound of her mistress's voice. She heard displeasure in its tones, and hastened, if possible, to screen her favourite from its effects. "Were you wanting her?"

"Wanting her, yes," replied Miss Brande, in a tone of some asperity; "she generally contrives to be out of the way if there is anything for her to do. Go and tell her to come in directly, and get dressed as quickly as she can. I want her to take the keys and go down with this gentleman to the Hall."

Hannah hurried off down the long garden, which straggled away at the back of the house as far as the river-side. She found Janet where she had expected, snugly seated in a little rocky recess, close by the water's edge—a quiet, out-of-the-way nook, carpeted with soft, fine grass, and roofed by the grey foliage of an old willow-tree, which, gripping the bank above with its long, bare roots, dropped its branches down till they almost dipped into the smooth, dark tide.

A great black Newfoundlander was lying stretched at her feet, his coat all dripping and shining in the sun, as though from the effects of a recent bath. He was flapping his big tail on the grass, and looking up wistfully in the face of his young mistress, who, however, was paying no attention to him just then. She was leaning forward over a little brown book which she held in her hand, and at which she looked from time to time, murmuring to herself in an under-tone, as though she were learning something by heart,

> "I wind about, and in and out,
> With here a blossom sailing."

"Miss Janet—Miss Janet!" called Hannah, stooping down over the rocky ledge.

"Oh, Hannah, is that you? How you startled me! What is the matter? Does my aunt want me?"

"Yes, dear; she's been seeking you ever so long. Come in, quick."

"Oh, Hannah, I did think I should have got this afternoon to myself. Why, she took Blair's Sermons, and went up to her room directly after dinner; and she scarcely ever comes down much before tea when she does that."

"Yes, Miss Janet, but there's been a gentleman called and disturbed her. Mr. Maudsley his name is; I let him in myself; and your aunt wants you to take the keys and go down with him to show him the Hall."

"What, me, Hannah?" said Janet, with a gesture of dismay. "Oh, dear! are you sure? Did she say so herself? It must be that gentleman Miss Gale came about. And my dress is all wet, too," she added, gazing down on it disconsolately; "Rollo splashed it with plunging out of the water."

"Never mind, dear," said Hannah, in a soothing tone; "you'd have had to have changed it, anyhow; you couldn't walk out with a gentleman, you know, in that old muslin. But come in quick, there's a dear; your aunt's vexed enough as it is."

"Well, it can't be helped, I suppose." And Janet shut up the little brown book with a sigh; and springing up the bank like a young fawn, she ran through the garden into the house, and upstairs to her own room, where she changed her limp muslin dress for another, fresh and clean, smoothed down her disordered hair, and in ten minutes was standing ready for her walk at the door of the oak parlour.

But there she stopped, her heart all in a flutter. If only she were safe in her little nook again, instead of having to face this terrible stranger! But she thought of her aunt's displeasure, pushed open the door with a sort of shrinking apprehension, and went bravely forward into the room.

There was her aunt, sitting upright in her high-backed chair, looking, to Janet's infinite relief, not cross in the least. There was the stranger, standing in the window with his hat in his hand—a tall, tawny-haired man, not at all corresponding to Janet's idea of an artist—more, as she privately thought, like Balder, the Sun-god, whom she had read about in the old Norse legends, only that he was dressed just like an every-day English gentleman. He was looking out into the garden as Janet came in, making some remark about a magnificent copper beech, which cast its broad shadow over the trim greensward.

Miss Brande turned round as the door opened.

"Where have you been, Janet? You have

kept Mr. Maudsley waiting more than a quarter of an hour. Are you quite ready now?" And she gave a keen look of inspection at Janet's toilette, in which, to tell the truth, there was generally something that needed rectifying. But this time there was nothing that even Miss Mildred could find fault with.

"I did not know I should be wanted for anything," said Janet, not very pleasantly. And then her aunt introduced her, and the gentleman turned and said, in an easy, courteous tone—

"I am sorry to give the young lady so much trouble."

And Janet answered eagerly, for she was afraid now he must have thought her little speech rather disagreeable,

"Oh, I don't mind in the least; I shall be very glad to go."

And then he looked at her with a smile that brought back the light into her face, and Miss Brande rose, and they went out at the glass door, and down to the garden-gate, and Janet found herself walking along by the stranger's side in the green lane that led to the plantation, through which was the nearest way to the Hall.

She walked along by his side with a shy, fluttering consciousness, that subdued her usual tripping step to one of more measured sedateness, better befitting the gravity of the occasion. She hardly knew what to do, or how exactly to behave. She was afraid it would seem rude or stupid not to speak to him at all, and yet she could think of nothing that would do to say; for Janet was not blest with the ease and self-possession of a young lady accustomed to society. She could not chatter composedly away to people she had never seen before, but felt herself abashed and self-constrained in the presence of a stranger. Perhaps it was because she was so unused to being in company. She had not even, as most girls have, any companions like herself. There was only Miss Alison Birney, and she was several years older than Janet, who looked up to her with a sort of shy reverence, rather than associated with her as a friend. Even her childhood had been a lonely one. She had had few playfellows, with the exception of Rollo, the great Newfoundlander, whom she would pet and caress as other children do their dolls, and Stub, the donkey, on whose back she used to make long excursions over the scrubby common stretching beside the plantation that bordered the Marton Hall estate.

Twice in the year, too, Harry Birney, the Rector's nephew, a fair-haired, sunny-faced lad, her chief friend and companion, came home for his holidays. And then what delightful times they used to have, building bridges across the brook that babbled through the Marton Wood, or sailing miniature fleets on the river that ran at the foot of the garden, or sitting up in the boughs of some crooked old oak, Janet listening with all her might, while Harry recounted in his eager way such exploits and adventures among his Eton schoolfellows as made her feel assured that, if not already a hero, he was certainly destined to become one.

But these pleasant days came to an end. The last time Harry had been to the Rectory before he went to India, her aunt had put her veto on this constant companionship. She had, moreover, forbidden the rides on Stub, and Janet, whose sense of propriety, when once aroused, was very keen, had sorrowfully relinquished the prohibited delights, and betaken herself, with perhaps not the best grace in the world, to the long tasks of fine sewing and embroidery which her aunt had substituted for them. "For she was growing a great girl now," Miss Mildred said, "and must begin to apply herself more steadily to what was really useful."

And over these tasks Janet had sat through long sunny hours, gulping down great choking thoughts of weariness and disappointment. And all the while the young life was growing and stretching within her, and the woman's nature beginning to heave and swell, and burst through its childish limits, just as the little green germ sprouts and pushes through its narrow prison. And in her breast was a strange tumult that seemed as if it would never settle down again into order, and her old pleasures were somehow losing their brightness, and everything felt rusty, and she wanted something, she knew not what, and felt as if every one was giving over being kind to her. And as the fresh juice of the grape turns thick and sour before it sweetens into wine, so she grew restless and discontented, and her lips took a sullen pout, and she wished something would come with a great rush and sweep her out of this hateful present into some sunny, warm, unknown future.

But nothing came. Life at their house was so quiet, so very quiet. Nothing ever happened to ruffle the even surface of that stagnant existence. One day was portioned out just like another, so that Janet could tell a month beforehand what she would be doing at almost any hour of the day, even what they would be having for dinner. People seldom came to call, except Miss Gale or the two Miss Curlews, and now and then the rector of the parish; but though Janet liked to listen to them well enough, she never ventured to talk to visitors on her own account when her father or aunt were by.

And so it happened that for the first time in her life she found herself the sole companion of a grown-up gentleman. Except, indeed, Mr. Ellis, her father's solicitor, from Bedesby, who had called once when only Janet was at home, and said he would wait until Mr. Brande came in. But then as soon as he sat down he had seen Janet's ferns, which she had growing under a shade, and had begun to ask her about them, and to tell her of one or two kinds she had not got, that were to be met with in the neighbourhood. And Janet had felt so eager and interested that she had quite forgotten to be shy, and the time had passed away so pleasantly that she had felt almost sorry when her aunt came in and took the conversation into her own hands.

But this Mr. Maudsley seemed so tall and strong as he walked beside her, crunching the gravel under his feet with such a grand, stately tread, as he strode along with steps to which she vainly tried to accommodate her own.

Once she stole a shy glance at him. He was walking along with that leisurely ingathering gaze, that easy royalty of mien and gesture, which mark everywhere the born kings of creation, those to whom all sights and sounds of nature bring their never-ceasing tribute of teaching and delight.

But Janet did not comprehend this. She onl saw in her companion's countenance something which made her feel, she could hardly tell why, such an insignificant little thing. And she was very glad she had not ventured on something she had been very nearly saying about the beautiful disks of brown and golden lichen which stained the crumbling grey wall that on one side of the lane fenced in the Marton plantation.

A little farther on was a gate opening on to a path that led by a short cut from the Priory House to the Hall, and through this gate they went, out of the breezy sunshiny lane into the green stillness of the wood.

And such a pretty wood it was, with its sun-streaked aisles of larches, limes, and beeches, and here and there a slight-stemmed birch tossing its green spray to the wind, while every trembling leaflet glittered with a cool, silvery sheen. And then the warm, hushed air was fragrant always with the spicy odour of the firs, and through the scented silence you might hear, if you listened, the plaintive coo of the wood-pigeon mingling with the muffled hum of insect life, or the rooks' monotonous caw, which was as the sound of slumber itself. And over all there rested the dreamy, golden haze of sunlight filtering through myriads of green leaves.

Janet always liked going through this wood. When she fastened the rickety gate behind her and turned into it out of the lane, she felt as if she had shut herself up in a little world of her own. It was like passing out of the bustling streets into the shadowed stillness of Bedesby Minster, filling her with a sense of delicious awe. But to-day she only felt this seclusion as shutting her in the more completely with this unsocial stranger. He had not spoken once since they left her aunt at the garden gate, and though Janet was too simple-minded to have any notion of pique at her presence being thus unceremoniously ignored, yet his silence was paralysing all her sense of enjoyment. She could not help wishing, as she stole a glance now and then at his face, and saw that he was not wrapped up in thought as her father usually was, but was evidently enjoying the summer beauty of the wood, with the fresh vivid perception of one who really sees what lies before him, that he would just say something which should let her share his pleasure.

She wondered whether he was making up pictures in his mind from what he saw, which he meant afterwards to paint. She often did so herself, only when she had her papers and colours before her, nothing ever came that looked anything like reality. But then this Mr. Maudsley was a real artist, or he would not have his pictures exhibited, as Miss Gale had told them the other day. And then she wondered what part of the Hall it was that he was going to paint, and whether she should see it when it was done.

But here the current of her thoughts was stayed. They had reached a five-barred gate pretty thickly interlaced with thorns, at one side of which was a narrow stile for the convenience, or inconvenience, as the case might be, of foot-passengers.

Mr. Maudsley set his foot on one of the rails, and resting his hand on the mossy post, strode easily across. He was walking unceremoniously along, leaving his companion to follow at her leisure, when a sudden thought appeared to strike him. He turned back, and seeing Janet just preparing to mount the stile, held out his hand to help her down; and then, for the first time, he broke the silence.

"Let me help you over. It is rather a high stile for a lady to cross."

"Oh, no, thank you," said Janet, hastily. She would a great deal rather he had gone on by himself, instead of coming back to witness her descent. "I have been over it hundreds of times before."

And she climbed lightly to the topmost rail, steadying herself before her leap by the drooping boughs of an ash that stretched down its long arms over her head.

Mr. Maudsley did not repeat his offer of assistance, but just reached up and took hold of her two hands, while Janet, a little flurried, sprang down to the ground.

Unluckily, a perverse brier, sticking across the top of the stile, had held fast on its thorny finger a portion of the trimming of her dress, and she only found herself on *terra firma* to discover that it was dangling in a festoon nearly half a yard in length.

"There now," exclaimed she, "I knew I should have managed better by myself." And picking two or three of the long thorns from off the brier, she stooped down, and dexterously contrived to fasten up her festoons with the slender spikes into something like tidiness.

Mr. Maudsley looked down at her as she knelt on the grass over her impromptu repairs, with an amused smile at her ready resources. Janet caught his glance, and fearful lest she had committed another breach of courtesy, exclaimed as she arose—

"It was all my fault; only I have climbed over that stile so often before——"

"Without such an accident as this," said Mr. Maudsley, completing her unfinished sentence. "Well, I believe I helped you to tear your dress, but I really don't think I could have mended it so deftly. I should never have thought of looking for pins where you found them."

Janet laughed merrily. This little mishap had been quite a relief to her, breaking the spell of silence that had made her so uncomfortable, and setting her at liberty to open out a little on the subject in which just then she felt most interested.

"Don't you think this is a very pretty wood?" she began, when they were fairly on their way again.

"Very," he replied, "I have been admiring it as I came along."

"Ah, I knew you were," said Janet, "though you did not say anything. I saw it in your face."

"It seems extensive, too," observed Mr. Maudsley, inwardly amused at Janet's remark.

"Oh, yes, it stretches ever so far. I got lost in it once, quite lost, and had to find my way out again by the sun."

"And how did you manage that?"

"Oh, I knew what time it was, and noticed which way the shadows of the trees fell; and then I went straight on towards the west till I got to the open country, and there I found directly where I was. Do you like the country about Marton, Mr. Maudsley?"

"It is as beautiful, perhaps, as a very level country can be, but a landscape is hardly perfect without hills."

"Ah, yes," sighed Janet; "it is sadly flat round Marton. Nothing but fields and hedgerows, and the broad still river flowing so lazily through the meadows. You can get peeps of the blue Wold hills, though, here and there; and there is just one place against the mill where you can see a bit of the Enderton range, all jagged peaks instead of smooth lines. Marget Lee says they mind her of Allanblae, that is where she was born."

"And who is Marget Lee?" asked Mr. Maudsley.

"Her husband is the Marton blacksmith. You will see his forge if you go home through the plantation. I do like to hear her talk Scotch. She says Allanblae is such a pretty place—right among the Highlands—'Heelans' she calls them. I wonder how it would feel to be on a real mountain," continued Janet, after a pause; "to see the great sweep of country stretching away at your feet, and to take deep breaths of the keen clear air. I do long sometimes to get away from these Marton flats. I feel stifling among them. I think life must be worth so much more among mountains than in a dead level country like this. It is——"

She stopped abruptly. Mr. Maudsley was looking down curiously into her face. What had she been saying? Was he laughing at her, Janet wondered?

"Go on," said he, guessing the cause of her sudden silence. "Don't be afraid, I like to hear you talk; it is like drinking from a running brook."

But Janet did not finish her sentence. She walked along by his side, feeling almost uncomfortable again, until a sharp bend in the path brought them all at once full in sight of the Hall.

⁂

CHAPTER III.

THE DESERTED HALL.

"THERE is the Hall," exclaimed Janet, as the high-peaked gables burst upon their view.

Mr. Maudsley paused to note the effect, with the keen glad eye of an artist who discovers materials for a picture in the scene before him.

Marton Hall was a quaint, irregular old place, built of a warm, brown-coloured brick. Apparently it had grown together just as the fancy or convenience of successive owners had suggested. There were stacks of clustered chimneys, Oriel windows and tiny latticed casements, carved gables with elaborate pinnacles surmounted by brazen vanes that glittered in the sun, and broad eaves casting deep shadows on the lichen-stained walls.

The greater part of the house seemed to be in tolerable repair, but the remaining portion had evidently been destroyed by fire. The walls were charred and blackened, and the stone mullions of the windows had fallen away, leaving unsightly gaps, through which might be seen the interior of the roofless chambers.

Many years must have elapsed since the event, for the gable-end was overgrown with ivy, which, like a smile upon a scarred and ghastly face, spread its green, glossy foliage over the ruins. And inside there had sprung up a sturdy young sycamore that was now lifting its head above its prison walls as though to take a peep at the fair world without.

And over the whole building there rested that indefinable hush, that air of desolateness, that never fails to gather round a place that once has been a home, but from which the sweet spirit of domestic life has departed, leaving it a house only, no longer a home.

Perhaps Mr. Maudsley was struck by the aspect of almost conscious weariness presented by the old house, as it stood there in the mellow haze of the afternoon sunlight; for after regarding it some time in silence, he said at last, as if finishing aloud some train of thought—

"It has surely been many years deserted!"

"Yes, for nearly five-and-twenty years; indeed, ever since the fire," answered Janet. "The whole of that left wing was destroyed by it. There used to be a splendid dining-room and drawing-room, and over them a great ball-room, with a beautiful conservatory at the end. I believe it was there that the fire broke out. Some of the flues had been overheated, and the woodwork caught fire. It was not found out until it was too late to save anything. Even the pictures and furniture were destroyed, for the family occupied the other part of the house. That was hardly injured at all by the fire. The wing that was burned had been added after the house was first built; and they say the walls are nearly three feet thick, so that the fire did not spread any farther."

"And it has never been restored?" said Mr. Maudsley.

"No," returned Janet. "It is a pity, though, for the rooms in the part that is standing are very nice and well furnished. Mrs. Grant—that is the housekeeper—keeps everything in beautiful order. But Mr. Holdych never comes to it. I suppose he never could bear to see the place again."

"Surely no part of the family were burned?" said Mr. Maudsley, who was beginning to feel somewhat interested in the history of the sorrowful old house.

"No, but the terror and shock killed his wife. She died the same night, and so did a little baby that was born in the midst of the tumult. It was a terrible grief to Mr. Holdych, for I suppose they had been married a long time, and this was the first child they had had, and it would have been the heir if it had lived. I think some way he had not been kind to her, and that made him feel the more about it. However, after the funeral, he left the hall, and has never seen it since. The servants all went away, too, except old Mrs. Grant, the housekeeper, and one maid, and a man who lives at the lodge, and looks after things in a general way. But he is an old man now, and it would be impossible for him to keep the place in anything like order. It is a sad wilderness," she continued, with a sigh, as she stooped to disentangle her dress from a vagrant brier that had straggled across the weedy walk.

"Do you know," she went on, "I always fancy this place is like that story of Mariana in the 'Moated Grange?' When I read that poem, it seemed as if it were just saying out all that this old house and deserted garden had made me feel Look here :—

"'With blackest moss the flower-pots
Were thickly crusted, one and all.'"

Janet bedded her foot as she spoke in the soft and dark cushion of lichen and moss that had spread over even on to the sides of the path.

"The first time I came here after I had read it I seemed to know the place better than ever I had done before; to see it more clearly, you know."

Mr. Maudsley was walking on a little in

advance, his hands folded behind him. He turned here, and looked into the eager young face uplifted to his own. Now that Janet's shyness had passed away, he found a freshness in her talk that pleased him; something even that in clear, girlish accents, responded to the deeper ring of his manly nature.

"That is what all true poetry does," he replied. "It shows to us plainly what before we perceived but dimly. We speak falsely when we talk of the creations of genius. A great poet does not create, he only sees more vividly than others what lies around him. He feels intensely that which, to ordinary men, is but a vague consciousness."

Janet made a thoughtful pause. It was something new to her to be talked to as if she were really a companion, and not merely a child. It felt very pleasant; she liked it more than she could tell.

"And I suppose it is the same with artists," she said, after awhile; "they see something, and then they make us see it?"

"Precisely."

"And with musicians, too," she added, a quick flash of pleasure lighting up her eyes. "They feel something that is too fine for words; and so they tell us it in music. I never thought of it before."

"I daresay not," said Mr. Maudsley; "perhaps not many girls would have been struck by it. But you have not got the whole truth yet. People may have a very intense artistic feeling without the power of expressing it either in tones, or words, or colours. There must be a kind of fusion between soul and sense for that, such as very few possess to any great extent."

"I understand," said Janet after another pause, "and that is why we should be so grateful to these great writers and artists. We should be dumb, and blind, and deaf, if it were not for them. Often, when I am reading anything that is very beautiful or true, it seems as if it were just saying out for me something that I had wanted to say myself, but could not find words for. What Pompey, old dog," she exclaimed, stooping down to pat a great tawny hound, who had come out of his kennel with a tremendous bark at the sound of steps in the courtyard, and then recognising Janet, had walked up, and was snuffing about in a friendly, dog fashion.

"Isn't he a fine fellow? He will let you touch him now, though he looks so savage. He always behaves very politely to my friends. Don't you, Pompey?" she laughed, giving a final caress to the huge brute, who went, clanking his chain, back to his lair.

She turned to ring at a side door of the hall.

"I ought to have taken you in at the front entrance, though, Mr. Maudsley. You would have received a better impression than coming in this way," she said, as they entered a long, narrow passage, along which they went through a sort of ante-chamber to the great hall itself—a hall nearly as large as a small house. It was deeply panelled with dark oak; at one side was a yawning, open fireplace, with iron dogs, a fine carved chimney-piece, and a pair of stag's horns branching out above. Two or three suits of old armour stood in the corners, the empty visors looking grimly at them as they entered the hall.

"I should not like to be here at night," said Janet, with a shudder. "I should be fancying the old knights would get into their armour again, and come down off their pedestals and walk about in the moonlight."

"You are superstitious," said Mr. Maudsley, laughing.

"No, I am not," said Janet; "only you know the Holdyches have lived and died and been buried at Marton for more than six centuries. This house itself is nearly three hundred years old. One can't help feeling as if somehow their life must have soaked into the walls."

"So you think they come back now and then, and revisit their old haunts?"

"You are laughing at me, Mr. Maudsley, I know; but I remember once papa showing me some animalculæ through his microscope in a drop of water. The *Volvox globatur*, I think he called them—so beautiful you can't imagine, like globes of living crystal, all floating so musically about."

"I have seen them," said Mr. Maudsley; "but what has that to do with spirits?"

"Oh, nothing; only you know I have thought sometimes that perhaps there may be living beings around us just in the same way, only our senses are not fine enough to see them."

There was a tone of hesitation just perceptible in her voice, as if she was venturing on uncertain ground. Mr. Maudsley looked down into her face.

"You have strange fancies, child," he said.

Janet turned away with a shy thrill of gladness. He had called her "child," this tall, strong man, who stood like a great rock beside her, she a wild flower at its foot. "Child!" The word sounded like a half-caress; it fell warmly and pleasantly on her little tired shut-up heart. For in a vague, unconscious way, the girl had been groping for that which sooner or later all women instinctively seek, something to reach up to and to lean against. And perhaps, indeed, this would be but the shortest formula for expressing the deepest and sorest need of all mankind—that inwrought sense of want and weakness, implanted doubtless in our breasts that thus our frail humanity might be drawn for satisfaction and support towards the Infinite itself.

But Janet would not for the world Mr. Maudsley should see the smile she could not keep from coming on her face. She busied herself in unlocking the double doors of the oak dining-room; and then she led him round it, and through the library and breakfast-room to the little boudoir that had belonged to the beautiful Mrs. Holdych. Afterwards she took him up the wide slippery staircase, with its heavily carved balustrades, that she might show him the Oriel chamber.

"It was in this room that Mrs. Holdych died," said Janet, in a hushed voice, "and nothing has been changed in it since."

But there was no tinge of romantic interest in the look which Mr. Maudsley cast around the stately old room. With the rapidity of an artist's eye he saw at once that here was the "subject" he had been seeking. He wanted a study for a Tudor bedchamber, as it might have been the night that Madeline kept her vigil in the moonlight. And here it was before him with all its accessories—the dark panelled walls, the massive furniture of carved walnut wood, the oval mirror in its antique frame, the toilette-table with its paraphernalia of quaint crystal and china, the canopied bed which stood forth into the room like a sepulchral monument, receiving on its sombre hangings patches of crimson, amber, and purple light, which fell upon it through the stained glass that filled the Oriel window.

Janet saw by the artist's face that he was thoroughly absorbed in what he was doing as he moved about to different parts of the room, trying with his keen examining glance from what particular point of view the best effect might be obtained.

She did not venture therefore to disturb him, but going quietly towards the window, opened one of the casements that she might admit some cool outer air into the close and stifled room.

She leaned a little out as she did so, to inhale the waft of perfume borne in by the breeze from the tangled masses of honeysuckle and jasmine that covered the outside walls and clasped themselves among the mullions of the window. She had thrown off her hat, and now as she bent forward in the sunlight, the low golden rays glistened through her hair, displaying its rare tint of russet-brown.

Janet had a finely-moulded head, and the rippling masses of hair, which were generally twisted in a loose knot behind, showed its noble outlines to perfection. As she stood thus in the embrasure of the window, resting with folded arms upon the broad low sill, Mr. Maudsley chanced to glance towards her. And at once his artist eye was arrested by the unconscious ease and elegance of her attitude.

Surely Fortune had favoured him. Here was his Madeline, waiting for him. His thoughts quitted the Tudor chamber and gathered around the form of the young girl standing there in the tinted light, so different in her shy, impetuous grace from the formed young ladyhood of London ball-rooms, or the blowzy beauty of the village belles whom he had occasionally sketched as "studies" for his rustic compositions.

"Do not move, Miss Brande," he exclaimed, as Janet turned her head. "Just as you are for one moment, if you please. I must sketch you for my Madeline—that is," he added, correcting himself, "if you will have the goodness to lend yourself to me for an hour or two some day. Would you dislike sitting for a study?" for Janet had looked round at his words with a quick, startled flush in her face.

It was only the flutter of glad surprise. The eager gladness that came the next moment into her eye was answer enough in itself, though she could only reply in a broken, fragmentary way,

"Oh, no; I should be very glad. I should not mind at all. I have wanted so long so very much to see a real artist paint. But are you sure I should do for you?"

Mr. Maudsley smiled at her enthusiasm.

"Admirably! If you could repeat the expression of that attitude, I should have just what I have been seeking," he said, looking at her with a half-amused, half-critical glance that brought the blushes into Janet's cheeks, and caused her to start up, embarrassment and delight struggling together on her face.

"Do you think you could spare me an hour or two to-morrow?" he asked. "I should like to get the effect while it is still fresh in my mind."

"Indeed I could," was her glad reply, "if only. Aunt Mildred will let me. But shall I really be of use to you?" she asked again, with an incredulous look in her uplifted eyes.

"Certainly," said he, laughing away her doubts. "You are precisely what I want. I could hardly have wished for a face and figure better suited to my purpose. But I ought to warn you that it is tedious work sitting for a study."

"Oh, never mind that. I shall not weary of it, if only Aunt Mildred will let me," she repeated, and then added, with a touch of hesitation in her tones, "Mr. Maudsley, would you mind—would it be too much trouble? Do you think you could ask her yourself whether I might come?"

The artist smiled. He recalled the little colloquy he had overheard between the aunt and niece, and promised that he would. The young girl would really make an admirable study for his Madeline, and it would be worth taking some little pains to secure her.

Janet was satisfied. She felt sure her aunt would accede to a request from such a source, though she might possibly refuse it out of mere opposition if made by herself.

"I am afraid I must go now," she exclaimed, as she clasped the fastening of the casement. "There is the half-hour striking. I shall only just have time to get home by tea. I am very sorry, but perhaps you will excuse me."

"Yes, yes; do not let me detain you," said Mr. Maudsley. And gathering up once more the effect of the quaint old room, the dim tinted light and the graceful figure of the young girl, he turned and went leisurely through the great double doors, and down the slippery staircase, into the half-lighted hall, where were the gaunt occupants that had inspired such eërie fancies into Janet's mind.

That same evening, as Janet sat with her aunt, busily netting at a long curtain—for it was too dark to go on any further with the fine marking of her handkerchiefs—Hannah came into the room with a note for her mistress. Bessy, Miss Gale's little maid, had just brought it, she said, with a message that she was to wait for an answer.

Janet guessed whom it was from, but she only bent her head more closely over her work while Miss Mildred read the note, took it in to her brother in his study, and finally came back and wrote an answer, which she gave to Janet to take out to Bessy.

When she returned, her aunt was sorting out the handkerchiefs which were still unmarked, putting them into a little pile by themselves.

"Janet," she said, "I must have these handkerchiefs finished to-morrow. You must set to work at them first thing after breakfast, and get them out of the way; you have been quite long enough over them already."

"Very well, aunt," replied Janet, inwardly hoping that the morning task was a prelude to the afternoon holiday. She thought it was not unlikely. Her aunt really was speaking almost pleasantly to her.

"And then in the afternoon you must go down to the Hall again. Mr. Maudsley has just requested me to allow you to sit to him for a picture he is engaged upon. He says, and your papa thinks, too, that it would be a great advantage to you to see a good painting in process. And now, Janet, as you have the opportunity of improving yourself, I hope you will try to make the most of it; and I do beg that you will conduct yourself properly, and not be so rude and perverse as you frequently are. I am sure this afternoon I was perfectly ashamed of you; you spoke in such a sullen, disagreeable way; you never seem to have the slightest idea that it is your duty to consider the convenience of any one but yourself."

Miss Mildred's voice had acquired considerable asperity as she proceeded with this little harangue. But Janet listened in silence: she knew by experience that to interrupt her aunt in the midst of a lecture was like pulling the string of a shower-bath, sure to bring down a fresh torrent on her head. Not that she yielded a passive obedience. There was a subtle perception about her, which distinguished between the accidental authority of circumstance and position, and that native influence which a sweet and powerful nature will always exercise on those around. None could really control Janet who had not first won their way to the citadel of her heart; and this, Miss Mildred, though a conscientious woman, and anxious in the main to do well by her niece, had never even attempted to do. She was to Janet rather a skirmishing force hanging in her rear, continually harassing her with complaints, irritating her to petty rebellion by superfluous criticism, and then wondering at the long fits of sullen silence which were sure to follow a regular outburst of impatient rebuke.

But to-night Janet's hopes for the morrow were as a triple shield against the captious remarks of her aunt. And she listened to them as we listen to the pelting of rain against the windows, when sitting warm and sheltered by the glowing fire.

"To-morrow—to-morrow!" were the words on which her fancy rang its changes, as her fingers flew swiftly over her work; and her aunt, mollified by her industry and silence, privately took a couple of the unmarked handkerchiefs, and laid them to be finished along with the work in her own particular basket.

CHAPTER IV.

ROGER LEE'S HOME.

MR. MAUDSLEY lingered for awhile in the deserted garden after Janet had left him, and then returned home by the plantation, instead of going round by the road. Consequently he came out just opposite to Roger Lee's forge, where he saw a sight that made him pause a moment to take in the effect.

At the further end of the smithy, his face lit up by the red glow of the forge fire, stood the village Vulcan, a hearty, goodhumoured-looking man, in a blue striped shirt, open to the waist, with the sleeves rolled up to the shoulders, revealing a pair of big brawny arms. He was grasping a huge hammer that he had just brought down with a mighty stroke upon a bar of hot iron that lay on the anvil before him. And standing just within the door was as pretty a young girl as you would meet with in a long summer's day, with soft blue eyes, and soft golden hair, and a soft, tender ripeness about her altogether, that made you long to take her up and cover her with kisses, as women snatch up a baby to caress.

This little peach-blossom was Jessie Lee, the blacksmith's niece. She had gone to call her uncle in to tea.

"There's the six o'clock bell putting in, uncle," she said; "and tea's very near fit. Aren't you coming in to clean yourself?"

The smith threw aside the heavy hammer he had been wielding, and wiped his forehead with his big bare arm.

"Tea is it, bairn?" I didn't think it had been so late. I'd gotten summut o' my mind as had putten thowts o' tea out altogether. Go your ways in, Jessie, an' tell your aunt I'll be in enow."

Jessie turned from the smithy-door, and went back into the house, while Roger, unbuckling his huge leathern apron, hung it up on a peg against the wall, and followed her into the yard behind the cottage, where was a pump and a rough towel hanging on a roller behind the back kitchen-door, by the aid of which he proceeded to perform the not unnecessary process of ablution.

It was a pleasant sight that greeted the eyes of Roger when, having "cleaned himself," and put on his grey house-coat, he made his appearance at his cottage-door. A sight, thank God! such as meets the eye of many a British workman who may be blest with a thrifty wife, a strong right arm, and the power of saying "No" to that second glass of brown ale which has lured on so many an unwary victim to lie down at last in a pauper's grave.

It was a good-sized room, with a red brick floor, thinly sprinkled with fine yellow sand, and whitewashed walls, on which hung a series of black-framed prints, representing in glowing colours the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." The ceiling was low, with sundry bunches of dried herbs and two or three substantial flitches of home-cured bacon hanging from the beams. At one end was a large open fireplace, which, this being summer-time, was decorated with a pot of fennel and mint, the kettle having been boiled and the cooking performed in a smaller kitchen behind. Opposite to the fireplace was a ponderous walnut chest of drawers, black and bright, on the top of which were arranged, as on a kind of household altar, the big family Bible, a large leather-backed prayer-book, and a Methodist hymn-book. The best tea-tray was reared up against the wall behind, a couple of pink shells were arranged on each side, and the whole was surmounted by a framed scripture-piece, the glory of Jessie's school career, whereon was depicted in wool-work, a representation of Joseph, as an apple-faced boy with his finger in his eye, being sold by his brethren to a company of black-a-viced Ishmaelites.

The evening sun came in pleasantly at the wide lattice window, with its curtains of blue-checked linen, and glimmered through a leafy screen of geraniums, fuchsias, and lemon-scented verbenas, upon a chintz-covered couch, whereon sat, sedate and upright, a sleek tortoise-shell cat, winking demurely, as Marget Lee moved backwards and forwards between the two kitchens, arranging the tea-things on a white deal table, which had been drawn up to a snug corner between the couch and the open window.

Roger Lee's wife was not of English extraction. She had been born and brought up at Allanblae, the little Scottish village whence Mr. Leonard Holdych had brought his beautiful young wife.

Within a month of her marriage the new-made bride had departed for India, her husband having a Government appointment there. She had taken with her Marget Boyd, who had already been for some years in the service of the family. Marget remained abroad nearly four years, and then returned, bringing with her their only child, Leonard, the present heir to the Marton estate. He was then a delicate child of three years old; and the anxious parents, dreading the effects of the climate of India, so fatal to the constitutions of English children, had reluctantly resolved to part with him, trusting that amid the fresh country air, and under the fostering care of his uncle and aunt, he would grow up to reward them for the pain of this early separation.

Marget remained at the Hall as little Leonard's nurse for nearly a year, when she resigned her charge, now grown a sturdy, high-spirited little fellow, into the hands of a young Scotch governess, and became herself the wife of Roger Lee, the Marton wheelwright and blacksmith, who had just set up in business for himself.

It was Marget's gift of quietness, her smoothly-braided hair and ever-busy fingers, which had won for her the big hand and warm heart of her husband. He was a sensible man in his way; and when he had got settled in business, and began to feel himself in want of a wife, had wisely looked about for charms likely to brighten his little fireside, when the pleasures of a stolen kiss, or a moonlight ramble through the green lanes of Marton should have somewhat lost their early glamour.

Marget, however, though endowed with qualities of this durable nature, warranted, like a piece of stout huckaback, to wash and wear well, was by no means destitute of more superficial attractions. Her hair, glossy and smooth as when Roger had first come courting her, though now plentifully sprinkled with grey, was folded away beneath a cap of spotless muslin, whose clear crimped border surrounded a face that still retained the traces of its early freshness. Her lilac print gown, short enough to reveal the shapely foot and well-turned ancle, of which, even now, the good woman was pardonably proud; the white kerchief gathered over her shoulders and across her bosom; and the blue-checked apron which completed her costume, all partook of that almost dainty neatness which surrounded her like an atmosphere. Altogether, as she stood by the little deal table filling the brown earthenware tea-pot out of a copper tea-kettle, almost as clean and as bright as itself, Marget Lee, notwithstanding the fifty years that had rolled over her head, presented a sight still comely and pleasant to look upon.

Apparently, Roger thought so too, for his face broadened into a smile of honest satisfaction as he stooped his head beneath the lintel of the cottage door, and beheld his wife in the midst of her preparations for his comfort.

"Marget, my lass," said he, snuffing the air in an inquiring manner; "thee's gotten summut uncommon good for tea, hasn't thee?"

"Griddle cakes—beauties," replied Marget, fetching a couple from the top of the stove in the kitchen behind, where they had been keeping hot, and diffusing the agreeable fragrance that had so pleasantly saluted Roger's olfactory nerves.

"But thee hasna wipit thy feet, Roger, an' there's the bass right anent the door."

"Bless the lass! I clean forgot the bass; but there's no dust to speak on," replied Roger, apologetically. "An' I'd summut o' my mind, let alone them cakes o' yourn, as the smell on 'em's as good as the taste o' what most folks makes," he continued, with a nice perception of the most effectual method of conciliation. "Now, Jessie, bring in thy chair." And as the young girl drew in to her place at the table, Roger spread his hands, and closing his eyes, devoutly repeated his usual formula:—"Lord bless these good things to our use, and us to thy service. Amen."

Notwithstanding the hot girdle-cakes, however, Roger did not appear to be greatly moved to enter into conversation; and what little talk there was during the meal was mostly carried on between Jessie and her aunt. At last he pushed his saucer and plate into the middle of the table, in token that he had finished his repast; and with a hearty "Thank God!" rose from the table.

"Jessie," said he, "get me my Sunday coat and hat." Then turning to his wife he added, "I'm going down to Reuben Leaf's. I've gotten summut o' my mind as I mun hev a bit o' talk with him about."

Marget, silent and wise, knew well enough that, in due time, she should learn the secret of her husband's abstraction; and without attempting to probe it at present, went to a drawer in the old walnut-chest, whence she selected a large blue-spotted cotton neckcloth, which she handed to him to put on.

Roger took it, adjusting it by the aid of a looking-glass that hung behind the door; then he took his Sunday coat, and having by a series of shakes, twists, and spasmodic jerks of his huge shoulders and arms succeeded in fairly inducting himself into it, he placed the hat, which Jessie had been smoothing round and round with her plump little hand, carefully upon his head, and stood erect in the comfortable consciousness of having achieved a toilet worthy of the occasion which had called it forth.

"Noo, then, I'm off," said he. "Ye haven't any message for 'em at the mill, Marget, have ye?"

"I've nane ava," replied his wife, "unless ye tell her that our Jessie heard Miss Alison Birney say that that wee black bantie of theirs was just the bonniest little birdie for a fancy breed that she'd seen for lang. She aye likes to hear her poultry praised, does Mrs. Leaf. But ye needna tell her unless there comes a good chance like o' bringing it in." And with this politic injunction to her departing lord, Marget turned about, and began to clear away the tea-things, put back the chairs into their places, and restore things in the cottage to their normal condition of cleanliness and order.

CHAPTER V.

THE MARTON METHODISTS.

ROGER, having got fairly under weigh, proceeded down the village with his usual leisurely swinging gait, in the direction of Reuben Leaf's mill. He found the miller walking up and down the garden by the side of his house, smoking his pipe in a meditative way, while a little blue-eyed grandchild, tugging at his coat-tails, toddled contentedly along beside him.

"Bless the bairn!" said Roger as he entered, lifting the child up into his broad bosom, and bestowing a sounding kiss on the little red lips.

"What, is that you, Mr. Lee?" said the miller, taking his pipe for a moment out of his mouth, while a look of pleased surprise dawned over his face. "An' how's Jessie an' the missis? Come your ways into the house; there's my wife throng preserving, but she'll be glad to see you all the same."

"I'm obliged to you," said Roger, seating himself on a wooden bench that was fixed beneath an overhanging beech, "but I think I'll just stop here. I've come to have a bit o' talk wi' you about summut as I've got on my mind."

"Ay, ay!" rejoined the miller, settling himself slowly down on the seat beside Roger. "Then we may as well talk it over here, an' have it to werselves. If you're in t' house the women must be putting in their word, an' they're nowt but bother in a general way when you've gotten business on hand. Not as I'm saying owt again 'em; nobbut you see they will speak afore they think; an' it puts you out when you've gotten a matter to settle as you have to take your intellects to."

Whether Roger agreed or not with the sentiments of the miller, he did not openly dissent from them; but taking off his hat, drew from the crown a huge mass of blue pocket-handkerchief, with which he wiped down his shining expanse of forehead.

"It's been uncommon warm to-day," said he; "I've been near swelted with the heat. Noo, did iver onybody see the like?" he exclaimed, as little Sally, who had run off to the house when her grandfather sat down, returned with a foaming mug of beer in her little fat hands, which she presented to Roger with an important air.

"Nanna's sent some beer," she said, gravely reaching it up.

"There's a clever little lass," said Roger, taking the mug out of the child's hand and quaffing a deep draught. "An' noo, let's see if I can't find a peppermint in some o' my pockets. I allays puts some goodies in of a Sunday for t' bairns at preaching. It helps 'em to put on the time when they begin to get a bit onaisy towards the back end o' t' sermon. I often wonders, poor little things! hoo they do to sit it out so well, wi' their little short legs dangling down afore 'em an' their heads nodding again their mothers' shoulders. Noo, Sally, see thee here!"

Roger had found a stray peppermint, which he put into the little round mouth open to receive it, and then drank off the beer at a draught, finishing up with a resounding smack of satisfaction.

"Noo, that's summut like," said he, as he gave the mug back to the child. "I allays says there's nowt like a drop o' good beer when a man's both dry an' tired, an' all. It picks me up sooner than owt, it does. Noo, Sally, tak' the mug back to your mother, there's a duckie! —an' tell her I return her a many thanks," he added, as the child slid down from his knee and trotted back towards the house. "An' noo, Mr. Leaf," continued he, "we'll hev a bit o' talk. There's summut as I've had o' my mind this good bit past, an' it's been on more nor common of late. We ought to hev a chapel at Marton." And Roger brought down his hand with a mighty thump upon his knee. "It doesn't seem right to my mind that we should be putting the Lord off wi' a barn any longer, an' us living in houses all fixed up and comfortable werselves. Not as I'm saying owt again the barn. It's clean an' tight, an' it's served us well a good many year. He's putten it to a good purpose has Brighouse, having it for t' preaching of a Sunday, when t' farm kitchen got over small. But when all's said an' done, to give the Lord the loan of a barn when He ought to have a house of His own, seems to me like eating the victuals werselves and giving Him the scrapin's!"

The miller did not speak, and Roger went on.

"There's a good society now in Marton, an' a good feeling among 'em; an' there's three or four on 'em as is pretty well off, an' would be willing to come forrard handsome, nobbut they saw their way clear. An' I'm not saying as Marget an' me would be back'ard when it come to it."

Roger paused here. Having like a skilful counsel opened his case, he waited now to see at what point it might be open to objections.

Mr. Leaf was not a man of many words. He was slow and wary. He liked to consider a matter on all sides before committing himself to an opinion upon it. Apparently he was considering this as he sat looking across the garden in a contemplative way, puffing his pipe slowly and at long intervals.

Roger's eyes twinkled with impatience. He was too thoroughly convinced in his own mind of the merits of his scheme, and felt that he had urged it too strongly upon his hearer's mind to be satisfied with anything short of an immediate assent to his proposal.

He prudently forbore, however, to give vent to his feelings. With all his simplicity, Roger possessed a fair amount of the wisdom of the serpent, and knew by experience that to jog the miller's faculties when he was in pursuit of a conclusion, was of about as much use as shaking a watch to make it keep time.

"It's a thing as I've thowt on myself," said the miller, at last.

It was well for Roger's cause that he had. The worthy man was slightly opinionated, and might not perhaps have received with much favour a proposal that had not had the advantage of originating with himself.

"But there's the land an' there's the money," he added, after another pause. "There's the land an' there's the money. Them's two points as takes a deal of considering."

"Why, bless you!" said Roger, who was disposed to settle the matter in a more summary way, "the land's the Lord's, an' the money's the Lord's:—we're nobbut giving of Him back His own, if we do let Him have it."

"Ay, ay!" returned the miller, drily. "But you see, though He's lent us a bit o' money, He's lent all the land to the Squire, an' mebby he'll be none so keen o' giving of it back again. There's not a bit o' land convenient as I can think on, but what belongs to him."

"He's near, is t'auld squire," replied Roger, "leastways auld Wimsley is, an' that comes to t' same thing, for he has all t' say now in this here place. But you see I'd been casting it about in my own mind," continued he, with a bright blink in his eye, which showed that something satisfactory was at hand, "an' it come to me all of a sudden, as you may say, like as if it had tummled out o' t' sky, and mebby it had for the matter o' that. You see there's that bit of a cottage as old Polly Webster used to live in, just over against Wimsley's house. Well, they've started pulling of it down, an' not afore it wanted it either. If they'd waited much longer, I reckon, it would ha' saved them the trouble by coming down of itself."

"But that's not big enough for a chapel," interposed the miller, "not near."

"No more it is," returned Roger; "but then you see there's that skreed o' ground alongside of it as Mark Thompson has for a potaty garden. Noo, he's a good man is Mark, an' a joined member, an' he'd give it up cheerful, I'll be bound, not to say that he could suit hisself as well or better elsewhere. If that was putten to Polly Webster's place we should just do, an' we could afford to give a good bit more for the lease on it than what they could get for it as it is."

"You're partly in the right, I daresay," said the miller, thoughtfully—"leastways so far as its being a good spot to build on, being right in the middle o' the village, an' handy for folks at both ends on it; but I doubt we'd never persuade old Wimsley to let us have it. He's dead-set again the Methodists. He'd never let 'em have a chapel right in his face as you may say."

"More shame to him, then," retorted Roger.

"What harm have Metherdisses ever done him? They've paid their rent reglar, haven't they, an' kep' their land tidy, them as has it? An' I should like to know how many Metherdisses in Marton has parish pay, an' how many he's seen coming out o' the Duke's Arms or the Cross-Keys wi' more nor they could carry? He'd count 'em on his fingers, I'll warrant, or my name's not Roger Lee."

"That's neither here nor there," replied the miller. "You may talk to a deaf man as long as you like; you'll nobbut waste your breath when you're done. An' you may just about as well try to make old Wimsley favour the Methodists."

"We'd ha' been more likely if it had been the Rector," said Roger; "he's a deal better sperrit towards us nor what old Wimsley has. He is not the man to shut folks out o' heaven because they go there by a different road to what he does hisself."

"Ay, ay," said Mr. Leaf, "but Wimsley's cut out o' different stuff altogether. He'll none do us a good turn if he can help it. It isn't in him, an' it can't come out of him," he added, decisively.

"I doubt he's a bit set again us," said Roger, "though why he should be it passes me to tell; but bless the Lord, He has the hearts of all men in His keeping. Mebby, auld Wimsley's may be oppened yet, particklar if he sees as it's to his interest to let us have the land. An' then, if we get him brought round, there's nobbut the money to get, an' that's easy done."

Notwithstanding this confident assertion, however, Roger looked somewhat dubiously into the miller's face, as though he would seek there some confirmation for his words.

Again the miller made a pause of consideration, while Roger drummed anxiously upon the arm of the seat.

"There's you an' me, Roger," said Mr. Leaf, at last, "an' there's John Brighouse and farmer Doyle. He isn't a member, isn't Doyle, but he comes reg'lar, him an' his family; and there's Wright the grocer. He has a good bisness, an' he's a liberal-sperrited man; and there's old Mrs. Partridge—she has a good bit o' money, and none for it after her, nobbut I doubt she's none over keen of parting with it."

"An' there's the Bedesby folks," burst in Roger, "an' the Haxby, and the Claythorp, an' the Strendall. They'll all help, I'll warrant. There's nowt like Metherdisses for giving," he continued, rubbing his hands. "They're bred an' born tull it, bless 'em! It comes nat'ral to 'em, an' it's wonderful," he added, after a pause, "hoo they seem to prosper on it. I'd a deal to do myself to addle a living when first I took up with them. I'd given a good bit for the goodwill o' the business an' the fixtures an' that; but, bless the Lord, I started giving, an' there isn't a man in Marton now as I'd change with. But there's your missis coming, Mr. Leaf. It isn't manners exactly for me to be sitting here, an' never going near hand her to say, 'How d'ye do?' An' Reuben an' all," he added, as Mrs Leaf came towards the seat under the beech-tree, followed by her son, a stalwart young fellow over six feet high, who looked as if he could hardly be the son of such a diminutive neat little woman as the miller's wife.

"Wont you take a turn round the garden, Mr. Lee?" said she, when the greetings were over. "The roses is out, I'm sorry to say, but there's a fine show of verbenas an' fuchsias, and some new geraniums as are just in their prime; an' there's the ribbon border as Reuben made this fore-end is beautiful, though I say it myself. Mr. Bean, that's the head gardener at Haxby, was over here last week, an' he says they haven't anything to beat it for its size, not at Sir John's."

Mrs. Leaf was proud of her garden, and justly, for it was without a rival far and near. Roger, therefore, could not have pleased her better than by the unfeigned admiration which he bestowed upon it, and which lured her on to a graciousness of demeanour which of late she had been more chary than formerly of displaying to either Roger Lee, his wife, or niece.

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CHAPTER VI.

CROSS PURPOSES.

MRS. LEAF, like Marget, had been in service at the Hall, and like her had married from it. But Mrs. Leaf had made what is technically termed a far better match than Marget. Her face had been her fortune. Indeed she had the reputation of being the prettiest little flirt for ten miles round Marton. Be that as it might, Reuben Leaf, who had just succeeded to his father's mill and business, was so bewitched that, notwithstanding his mother's protestations, nothing would serve but he must bring home the pretty waiting-maid as his wife.

She settled down, however, after her marriage, as often happens in such cases, into a faithful and affectionate little wife, directing the energies which before had been expended on smart aprons and ribbony caps into the management of the most notable household and the best-behaved children in the village.

But though Mrs. Leaf had always been on very friendly terms with Marget Lee, she was by no means blind to the difference in their respective positions; and no sooner, with a woman's instinct, had she detected the first faint signs of a growing fancy on the part of her son for the fair-haired Jessie, than she set herself with all the force of a woman's will to nip the unwelcome bud before it should have blossomed into open love.

She was too politic, however, by actual resistance to fan into a flame a fancy which, she fondly hoped, would die out if left to itself; still, a coolness which of late Marget had felt rather than perceived, was causing their intercourse to be less frequent and familiar than it had been of old. But as I said, Roger's unconscious flattery had this evening availed in considerably abating this feeling of reserve; and Mrs. Leaf walked along by the smith's side in perfect complacency, unmindful for the present of her doubts and apprehensions.

Mr. Leaf had fallen behind, and was sauntering composedly along, quietly enjoying his interrupted pipe; while Reuben lingered among the bloom-bordered alleys, cutting here and there the freshest and choicest of the flowers, which he was arranging with some taste and skill into a small but beautiful bouquet.

"Mr. Lee," said he at last, coming up to the pair; "do you think your Jessie would like a slip or two of this begonia? It's growing out o' shape rather on this side, an' I've been thinking o' nipping off two or three of the shoots. It's a chancy thing setting 'em at this time o' the year; but Jessie's allays uncommon lucky with her cuttings, an' it's a pity for 'em to be wasted. There isn't another like it in this country side, forbye what grows in Sir John's greenhouses. It was his head-gardener as gave it me."

"I don't see as there's anything amiss with the plant," said Mrs. Leaf, turning quickly round, and speaking rather more eagerly than was her wont. "Nobody would see as it wasn't just even if you didn't tell 'em."

But it was too late. Already Reuben had pinched off two or three of the straggling shoots, with their drooping clusters of coral bells, and was putting them among his flowers.

His mother noticed the bouquet, and at once divined for whom it was intended.

"You haven't been pulling one o' the blooms off that blood geranium, Reuben?" said she, in a tone full of concern; an' the first time it's flowered."

"Don't take on, mother," answered Reuben, in a soothing voice; "there's two left on, an' more to come out, an' it's bad for a young plant to spend itself with over much flowering. Besides, Jessie hasn't seen this geranium since it's flowered. It's a long time, Mr. Lee, since she's been here."

"Oh! they're for Jessie, are they?" said his mother, with a little toss of her head; while Roger, whose fine social sense was beginning to warn him of the disturbance in the air, moved towards the gate, saying—

"I mun be going now; my missis will be wondering what's gotten me."

"I think I'll just step down with you," said Reuben, who was tying up his flowers with a strip of matting. "It isn't late, an' then I can tell Jessie about these here slips."

"Nay, you aren't going yet," said the miller, coming slowly up.

"Stop and have a bit o' supper with us," said Mrs. Leaf, with the shrewd design of thereby keeping Roger until it should be too late for her son to accompany him home. "There's a beautiful duck we've got as ever was seen. Not as we're given to having ducks for supper in a general way. But, however, I'm glad, seeing as you're here to eat it with us."

Roger, however, was proof against the temptation of Mrs. Leaf's duck; and with a twinkle of vexation in her eye, the miller's wife watched him and Reuben, as they crossed the bridge that led over the mill-stream, and turned down the road leading to the village.

There was a twinge of honest pain, too, in her breast as she looked after her son, and felt that she who so long had reigned supreme in his affections, must yield her place now to another. The jealous mother-love was rebelling against that old fiat—“For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife.”

For Reuben was her youngest and favourite child. He had been born when a long succession of daughters, most of whom had died in their infancy, had almost extinguished the hope that she should ever have a son. All the pride and joy of a mother’s heart had been centered on this latest born; and though she had looked forward to his some time bringing home a wife worthy of himself, and had even fixed in her own mind who that wife should be, she could not, without a keen pang of disappointment, see herself displaced by a chit of a girl, whose social disadvantages so far outweighed the personal qualifications which even Mrs. Leaf was not prepared to deny that she possessed.

The twilight had fallen, and a bright fire was gleaming through the lattice window, when Roger and his companion reached the cottage door. Marget was sitting upright in her elbow-chair, knitting swiftly at a rough grey stocking, her needles the while making a clicking accompaniment to the light movements of Jessie, who was busy setting the little deal table for supper.

"Jessie, my lass," cried Roger, as he opened the cottage door, "put down another knife and fork. Here's Reuben Leaf 'll have a bit o' supper with us."

A quick blush flitted over Jessie's face as she turned away to reach a tumbler from the dresser behind her. It had disappeared, however, when she came forward to give a quiet greeting to Reuben, who having paid his respects to Marget, was preparing to make his offering of the flowers.

The stalwart fellow, who could have felled a bullock with that sinewy right arm of his, shook like an aspen when Jessie's slender fingers touched his own.

"There's nobbut two or three on 'em," said he, in a voice all unlike his usual ringing tones;

"but I thought you'd like 'em. An' here's a slip or two of that ruby begonia. I didn't cut 'em o' purpose, they wanted to come off," he added, with that delicate depreciation of his gift which marks a native courtesy of soul.

Jessie took the flowers with just a word or two of thanks.

"I'll lay in the slips in the back garden while to-morrow morning," said she, without lifting her eyes to Reuben. "It's over dark to see to set them to-night."

"Sit ye down, Reuben, sit ye down," said Roger. "Why, you're not going yet, an' supper just fit? What have you gotten for us, Marget? Nobbut potaties? Well, they're not to name with your mother's duck, Reuben, to be sure; but there's a warm welcome to kitchen 'em if you'll stop."

Reuben would have liked nothing better than to have accepted the invitation thus pressed upon him; indeed, it was partly in the secret hope of receiving it that he had accompanied Roger home; but with that inexplicable shrinking which often causes a deep love to turn from the very thing it longs to obtain, even when it is just within its reach, he took up his hat with some excuse about their waiting for him at home, and hardly daring so much as to put his hand again in Jessie's for a farewell greeting, left the cottage, and set out on his homeward way.

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CHAPTER VII.

THE MADELINE.

IT is a terrible thing, the first waking to a great grief, after the respite of a night of sleep. There are not many who cannot recall the thrill when the vampyre Memory, that had been watching for our first return to consciousness, fastens again upon the aching brain. And just so sweet is it when, as a child wakes to find its latest toy still grasped in its tiny hand, our earliest thoughts fold themselves around some strange new sense of joy, which all night long we had carried with us through our dreams.

Janet woke the next morning with the sound as of some one calling her echoing in her ears. She heard it so plainly that she started up in bed to listen. But the house was still, quite still. She could hear, in the twilight hush, the deep ticking of the great clock on the staircase, and the feeble twittering of a sleepy bird in the jasmine outside her window. She laid down her head again on the pillow. It must have been a dream, but it was such a pleasant voice. And then there floated back to her the remembrance of the previous day, of her walk through the wood, of that long bright talk with Mr. Maudsley. And sounding softly through it all was that one word he had spoken to her, "Child, child."

"He called me 'child,'" said Janet to herself, over and over again, and she nestled down her thoughts upon the word, as a linnet nestles its head beneath its wing.

There was no need this morning for Miss Mildred to reprove her for want of industry. She stitched away at her marking as though her life depended on her finishing the task in time. And she did it well, too; for though, when her aunt examined it, she gave her no word of commendation, yet she did not find fault, and with Miss Mildred that was equivalent to approval.

When the time came she took the keys and went through the wood at the appointed hour to the Hall, and there Mr. Maudsley was waiting for her, leaning on the rusty drawbridge, with his portfolio and colour-box beside him. And all was just as pleasant as she had anticipated. She had been a little afraid, it is true, of being put into a position, and had doubted whether she should be able to keep still so long; but it was all quite easy, and not disagreeable at all, when they really set to work, Mr. Maudsley to sketch and she to sit for him. And then it was so nice listening to his talk, for he had been almost everywhere; up the Rhine, and he knew all about the old towns and castles on its banks; and he had been in Switzerland, too, among the mountains, and through all the beautiful scenery in England, that she had so often longed to see. It was almost as good as going to the places herself.

And he let her talk to him whilst he was painting, and Janet found so many things to say. It seemed as if quite a fountain of thoughts were gushing up all at once within her. She wondered almost where they all came from. And then such a great piece of the picture he did in that one afternoon. Nearly the whole of the figure was sketched in before she came away; and so easily, too, he did it, as if he hardly needed to think at all of what he was about.

And then he said "good-bye" to her so kindly, and the next afternoon she was to go again just in the same way. And when she got home her aunt Mildred seemed quite willing to let her do so; she even said what a fortunate thing it was, and that seeing Mr. Maudsley paint would be worth as much to her each afternoon as lessons at half-a-guinea each from the first drawing-master at Bedesby.

Ah, how pleasant it would be, she thought, as she sat down after tea to write out an abstract of a chapter in "Rollin." Such dry work those abstracts were! There was nothing to hinder her, nothing at all, from being just as happy as ever she could be.

The family at the Priory House were very primitive in their ways. At nine o'clock they had supper and prayers, after which Hannah locked and bolted the outer doors, put the bells on the shutters—for it was a lone house, and Miss Mildred was timid at the idea of thieves and burglars—and then brought lighted candles into the dining-room, put out the lamp and set it away on the sideboard, lest Bessie, coming in to open the shutters in the morning, should stumble against it in the dark, and lastly, carried up in the plate-basket to her master's room. The great clock on the landing, which was always kept exactly ten minutes forward, was generally striking ten just about the time that Janet was going upstairs to her own room. She used to think it was a pity to have to leave the warm fireside so long before she was ready to go to sleep, and privately would often steal an hour after all the house was still, to sit poring over the books that to the lonely girl stood in the place of other companions. There was no public library at Marton, and no Mudie to circulate its stream of current literature among the inhabitants; and the books in her father's study were mostly dry scientific treatises, possessing as little flavour for Janet as a dry bone for an epicure. She would have had but little mental pabulum therefore, had it not been for Miss Alison

Birney, the rector's daughter, and from her Janet procured, from time to time, books better suited to her taste—works of poetry, biography, and fiction, magazines and quarterlies, on which the girl fed, reading them again and again, and storing up long passages in her memory. Often she carried a volume away with her on her rambles over the common or through the wood, for somehow her aunt was pretty sure to find something for her to do if she saw her sitting comfortably over a book in the house. Not that she forbade her reading it by any means, only she disliked, she said, to have her wasting her time over poetry and nonsense, when she might be more profitably employed.

So Janet made a deep pocket in her frock, and if it were a story or poetry used to carry her book about with her, and read in it surreptitiously as opportunity offered. But to-night the little brown volume that she had been so eagerly conning at the river-side the day before, when Hannah had interrupted her, lay forgotten in her drawer.

For all that evening, as she had sat in the dining-room at her work, her thoughts had been rushing hither and thither over her visit to the Hall, and she had been thinking over all that the artist had said to her, and how pleased he had seemed to be with his sketch, and how anxious he was for her to continue to sit for him. And then she recalled his pleasant tones and bright kind looks, and how he had treated her with consideration, as though she had been as much of a grown-up young lady as Miss Alison Birney herself, and had really conversed with her, and listened quite attentively to all that she had had to say. So different, so very different from anything she had ever known before. And he was going to paint quite a large picture, he said, from this sketch; and this picture was to be called "Madeline," and would be exhibited next spring at the Royal Academy. How strange, that all the great people in London would see, by-and-bye, what would be in reality a portrait of herself!

And these thoughts, which had half turned her young head, Janet carried up with her to her chamber. They caused her, as soon as she went in, to sit down before the old-fashioned mirror and look in it long and earnestly at herself.

She had looked often before, but carelessly, with no special interest in the face she saw reflected there, mindful only of getting her dress passably tidy, and her thick tresses of hair smoothed down, so that her aunt should not need to find fault with her about them. But now she looked eagerly, intently, with a fluttering anxiety as to the verdict to be pronounced. Janet did not ask herself the cause of this. Her feeling was too much a part of herself for her to put it aside and examine it. She only felt as if suddenly a door had been flung open in her life, and she were stepping forth into a beautiful dazzling world without. For even now, though she knew it not, the child-nature was passing away, its close green calyx being torn open, and all her blossoming womanhood was expanding to the sun.

And so it was that she sat to-night seeking an answer to the question, which she is hardly woman who, at one time or another in her life, has never asked. And as she looked, the old mirror gave back a pleasant answer to these unspoken questionings. It told her, what the girl had longed to learn, that she was fair. And as she bent over the imaged face her lips curved into a quiet smile, and she gazed the more intently into the dark liquid eyes that looked through their long fringing lashes into her own, until it seemed almost as if another presence were in the room. For a moment a half thrill ran through her frame, and she turned aside as if to assure herself, by the sight of the familiar objects around her, that she was indeed alone.

And then she leaned down her face into her two hands, and sweet thoughts folded themselves about her, and vague fancies floated in the air. And from these she wove a robe, too bright and gossamery to be worn in such a rough workaday world as this, fit only for the stage on which the girl was enacting her little fairy drama. But the clock on the stairs struck—eleven sharp, ringing notes. The footlights were dashed out. The machinery of her stage fell to pieces, and Janet started up to find herself alone in her chamber, her candle burning very low, almost into the socket, and the old mirror before her with the face looking out of it still.

She undressed herself hastily, lest she should be left in the dark, and so, stumbling over her toilette, make some noise which might be heard through the silent house and disturb her aunt, who slept in the next room to hers. She brushed out her long hair, repeated her simple prayers, and then lay down, folding her new-found happiness closely in her thoughts, and dreamt that the "Madeline" was finished, and that it came out of the frame, clasped its arms around her, and kissed her on the brow.

After this came many long bright days to Janet, each one happier than those that had gone before. For she went nearly every afternoon, and sometimes in the morning too, to sit to Mr. Maudsley for "Madeline." And in truth the artist was very kind to the girl, as indeed he was to every one in whom he took an interest. There was an affluence of life about him that flowed forth unconsciously, and sunned and warmed all whom he drew within his influence. And Janet pleased him. He saw the folded beauty in her character, as well as in her countenance, and liked smoothing her out, as he would a crumpled note, and reading the rich promise inscribed thereon. He never spoke to her about himself, but he encouraged her to tell out to him all her own thoughts and fancies, her wishes and complaints. He talked to her of the books she liked best to read. He made her sensible of the powers which she possessed. He gave a voice to much that had till now been dumb within her.

And all this, like rain on pastures parched by drought, began to awaken a sense of springing life within her. There was dawning on her the consciousness, so sweet to every one who for the first time feels it, that she—this hitherto unnoticed Janet—possessed within herself that which was pleasant even to one towards whom she looked up herself with such utter reverence. In her, this wayside flower, there was then a drop of honey, sweet even to him. Such a little while before and her life had felt so narrow, so empty, and aimless. And now a new beautiful world seemed to be expanding round her, steeped in a haze of rosy light. Innumerable tendrils were springing from her on every side, ready to clasp and twine about this new-found friend, who, like a tall forest tree, seemed to lift her into a higher, sunnier air. Everything was changed. She was learning to be happy now.

And so the year crept on. The harvest was all got in. The village children came home from their rambles with their mouths all stained with purple bramble-juice. The leaves began to grow crisp and bronzed upon the trees, and the tawny gold upon the robin's breast to deepen to a russet red. And as the fruit mellowed on the orchard boughs, so Janet Brande's life was ripening into womanhood.

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAWYER IN LOVE.

MR. WIMSLEY, the village lawyer, and manager of the Marton estate, was deep in thought; so deep, indeed, that the spiced ale which was simmering before him in the little saucepan on his parlour fire bubbled up, and was sputtering over with an ominous hiss, before he could arouse himself sufficiently to take off the pan, and pour its contents into the deep tumbler which stood on the table by the side of the smoking Welsh rabbit, which Mrs. Green, his housekeeper, had just brought up for her master's supper.

Mr. Wimsley was fond of his supper. He liked to take it in a leisurely way, enjoying the comfortable consciousness that for the next two hours he might toast his toes by the blazing fire, and spread himself forth to the genial warmth in his deep-cushioned chair, without fear of interruption from the visits of anxious clients or refractory tenants.

To-night, however, he sipped his ale and nibbled at his supper with an air of abstraction that plainly showed he had not laid by the cares of life with the rusty office-coat that he generally wore during business hours.

The spiced ale grew flat, and the Welsh rabbit cold and flabby, long before Mrs. Green was summoned to bring in its stead the pipe and tobacco wherewith her master was wont to regale himself until it was time to betake himself to bed.

From Mr. Wimsley's appearance, you might conclude at once that he had not been born south of the Tweed. There was a haze, however, resting upon his parental relationships, which he had never seemed particularly anxious to remove, further than by certain vague hints occasionally thrown out, which would lead casual hearers to suppose that he was in some way connected with a family of aristocratic pretensions. Mr. Stinson, the Marton doctor, used to have a sly laugh at the lawyer sometimes on this point, and when he was in a facetious mood, had been known to express a belief that there was a bar-sinister immediately above him on Mr. Wimsley's escutcheon, which it would be neither possible nor prudent to attempt to overleap.

Mr. Wimsley had been settled in the village for nearly twenty years, and having had the management of the Marton Hall estates during the whole time, was generally supposed to have made a pretty good thing of it. Eight years ago he had married a pretty blue-eyed little wife, with a delicate chest and a fortune of a thousand pounds. Her nervousness and ill-health had been a constant source of annoyance to him, from the time of their marriage until little more than a twelvemonth after, when she died, as the doctors said, of a decline, but, as her friends more truly conjectured, of a broken heart. The poor little thing had staked her all, and lost it. What better could she do than die?

For nearly seven years, therefore, the Marton lawyer had been the cynosure of all the enterprising widows and elderly young ladies of the village; and being, if not exactly handsome, yet very passable in his appearance, and moreover, as things went in Marton, a tolerably well-to-do man, it was his own fault, doubtless, if he had not again entered into the bonds of Hymen.

Latterly, however, Mr. Wimsley, after long consideration, had decided on selecting some one fitted, by the possession of the charms in which he prided himself on being no mean connoisseur, to be promoted to the post of honour which he had it in his power to bestow.

And if to personal attractions could be added those of pocket and position, so much the better; for though he had the business of the estate, yet Marton itself was a peaceable little place, and not given to make quarrels for the sake of lining the lawyer's pockets.

But the perverse little god, whose sole amusement seems to be to traverse the best-laid plans of mortal man, had winged an arrow with the fair Jessie's charms, and so effectually pierced the lawyer's heart, that henceforth life appeared to have one object only—namely, to obtain possession of the coveted prize.

Mr. Wimsley was vexed with himself, as it was natural he should be. Not that Jessie was poor, for her uncle was laying by money, and would probably leave her a tidy little fortune. But then her position! He who might not unreasonably aspire to mate with almost any member of the upper ten of Marton, to lower himself by an alliance with a mere dressmaker—a blacksmith's niece!

Like most wise men, he took counsel with his pillow; but after tossing about through several sleepless nights, he only found himself at the point where he began. Moreover, with the keen eye ot jealousy he had discovered that he was not the only admirer of Roger Lee's niece. He had noticed the long lingering looks which Sunday after Sunday were cast by Reuben Leaf towards the smith's pew, from his place in the singing-loft. He knew only too well how it was that he always chanced to be coming out of church just when Marget Lee was taking her husband's arm at the door, and how it was that he should have so much to communicate to Roger and his wife, when so many nice-looking girls and smart young fellows were standing about chatting in little groups, any of whom would have been glad for him to have joined them.

It is true he had noticed also the impatient twinkle in Mrs. Leaf's eyes, as she turned back from the churchyard-gate, and saw her son still by Roger's side. But then that itself was, like smoke, a sign of danger, showing that fire was not far off.

And Jessie, too. It did not follow because she drew up more closely to her aunt, and by a certain shy reserve seemed to discourage these open attentions from the miller's son, that she must therefore be indifferent to him. Mr. Wimsley was not without discernment, and would have felt more safe to have seen her chatting briskly with the young man, than walking so silently along with downcast eyes and flushing face.

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, filled it again with fresh tobacco, took a leisurely sip at his little tumbler of whisky toddy, and then resumed his meditations. Something must be done, and that without delay, for it was plain that if he stood still in the matter, his prize would ere long be wholly out of reach. And the bare idea that Reuben might secure it goaded him like a spur in a galled flank. In short, he found himself in the position of a man who, lest hands other than his own should bear away the object round which his fancy has long been only hovering, is by that very cause irresistibly impelled to seize it for his own.

To-day, however, two little circumstances had occurred which, by judicious management, he thought might fall out to the furtherance of his plans. In the first place, Roger and the miller had been to his office about the bit of ground for a chapel. Six months ago, their request would have been met by a point-blank refusal; but now this little affair with Jessie had complicated the question, and Mr. Wimsley had given them to understand that he would take the matter into consideration, the miller, however, having gone away impressed with the conviction that they should fail in their object, while Roger was as sure that they should certainly succeed.

In the next place, Mr. Leaf, having got the chapel business for the present off his mind, had stayed behind to have some talk about the renewal of his lease, which would expire next Lady-day, and to negotiate for a small farm of fifty acres which would at the same time be vacant, and which he was anxious to take; for, as he said to Mr. Wimsley, "You see, our Reuben 'll be of age fore-end of next year, and I'd been thinking of putting the farm to the milling an' giving him a share in the business. He'll be looking about him an' wanting to settle, I reckon, some o' these days, an' t' mill wont keep two kitchen-fires going of itself. There's a tight little farm away yonder at Haxby as I'd had thoughts o' putting of him into; but it's over seven mile off, an' his mother's sore at parting with him; an' somehow the lad seems to be hankering hisself after biding at Marton. There's a limed twig, I'm thinking, somewhere hereabouts."

The lawyer winced, and in the same moment decided that the fifty-acre lot should not be added to the take of the mill. It would be safer a great deal, he reflected, to have the young man out of the way on the Haxby farm. Accordingly, he told the miller that he was sorry he had not spoken earlier about the matter, as he had made arrangements now which he did not think could well be altered. He added also that, as a young man must leave home some time, it was a pity to miss a good start in life for the sake of keeping him a year or two longer at his mother's apron strings.

As he sat now, smoking his pipe and basking in the warmth of his parlour fire, Mr. Wimsley was mentally reviewing the proceedings of the day, and was just chuckling over the neatness of this last manœuvre, when he was arrested by a sharp, prolonged peal of his front-door bell. He started bolt upright in his chair and listened intently, while the little maid-of-all-work scuffled through the passage in haste to answer the somewhat unusual summons.

For Mr. Wimsley lived quietly—that is to say, though he went out a good deal himself, he seldom entertained company himself at home, so that a ring at the bell at this time of night was a somewhat unusual occurrence. But surely Fortune must have been in an affable mood to-night, for when the servant opened the parlour-door to usher in the visitor who had just arrived, Mr. Wimsley saw advancing, flushed and breathless, the very object of his anxious thought.

She came forward eager and excited, and before the astonished lawyer could frame a word of salutation, was unfolding to him the nature of her errand.

"Oh, sir, will you please come to our house? Uncle has had a hurt, and he wants to make his will. He's very bad, sir, or we wouldn't have thought of troubling you to come out this time of night; and he can't be easy till he's got it off his mind. I'm very sorry, sir, I'm sure; I ran all the way here," she continued, turning very pale, and speaking now in a gasping, uncertain voice.

Overcome by fatigue and agitation, the sudden change from the fresh pure air without to the close and heated atmosphere of the little parlour had been too much for her. Her knees trembled under her, and even while she spoke she sank down, half-fainting, on a seat, only however to feel herself in the lawyer's arms. He was placing her in his own easy-cushioned chair, and the next moment, not sorry for the excuse, had untied and taken off her little straw bonnet and brown tweed cloak with as much apparent solicitude certainly as even such an occasion could possibly require.

The little blue-eyed wife had been accustomed to faint away on the slightest conceivable ground without eliciting any particular attention from her legal head; but, then, this was a case altogether different, and Mr. Wimsley felt disposed to make the most of his opportunity.

Jessie, however, soon recovered herself—much sooner, indeed, than Mr. Wimsley could have wished, and, opening her eyes, met the look bent upon her, full, as she innocently supposed, of anxiety and concern.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she murmured, the colour flushing back into her cheeks. "It was very foolish of me, but I am better now;" and as she spoke she rose, though still somewhat weak and trembling, as if to convince him that he need no longer feel any uneasiness on her account.

"Sit still, sit still, Miss Lee, pray do," said Mr. Wimsley, pressing her back into the chair. "You had better keep yourself quiet for awhile, much better. And drink this," he continued, getting a decanter from the cupboard, and pouring out carefully half-a-glass of wine. "There, take it all; don't be afraid. It will do you good, it will, indeed."

Jessie—her heart running over with gratitude for all this kindness and consideration—drank the wine, and then, really feeling quite herself again, took up her bonnet and cloak and began to tie them on.

"Well, my dear," said the lawyer, seeing that she was preparing to go, "and now about this unfortunate affair. Is your uncle very much hurt?"

"I am afraid so, sir," answered Jessie, with a little sob in her voice. "He got a kick from a horse this afternoon, and he hasn't been himself till about an hour ago. Doctor Stinson was out, and we had to send to Bedesby for some one. He says he'll maybe come round with care, but he wont answer for it till he's seen him again."

"Dear, dear!" said Mr. Wimsley, putting as much concern as possible into his tones; "and he wishes to settle his affairs, then—very proper, very proper."

"Yes, sir, if you would be so kind as to come."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly. If you will just wait a minute, I will get what is required, and step down with you at once."

With these words Mr. Wimsley went out of the room and across the passage, through the green baize door that opened into his office. He returned in a few moments, duly provided with all that the occasion rendered necessary.

"And now, my dear," said he, when the street-door was closed behind them—how odd it was, Jessie thought, that he should keep calling her "my dear"—"take my arm; nay, don't be bashful. You will be the better for a little help."

Jessie was hesitating whether or no she should accept the proffered honour. However, Mr. Wimsley settled the question for her by taking the little hand and drawing it snugly within his arm.

How delightful it was walking along there under the stars, the light footsteps tripping musically beside him, and the round soft arm pressed closely within his own! *Very* closely sometimes, though Jessie happened just now to be too anxious about getting home to notice the furtive squeeze. It was a new sensation. It was as good as drinking a glass of toddy strong and hot at somebody else's expense. And Mr. Wimsley drew the little arm still further within his own, and bestowed upon it what he intended to be a very meaning pressure.

Jessie, however, received it with perfect unconsciousness. They had reached her uncle's house, and in the open doorway stood her aunt, whose listening ear had caught the sound of footsteps, and who was waiting now until the two should come up.

"He's much about it," said she, in answer to Jessie's eager questioning. And then addressing Mr. Wimsley, who was making such condolences and inquiries as the occasion seemed to demand, she began to thank him for his speedy compliance with her request.

"He's been speiring after ye sin' ever Jessie went, sir," said she. And bringing the lawyer into the kitchen, a little in confusion now, but still bright and cheerful, she set him a chair and went upstairs to prepare her husband for his visit.

The sick man's affairs were soon settled. Mr. Wimsley found to his satisfaction that he was possessed of more than five hundred pounds, the whole of which, at her aunt's death, was to go to Jessie, with the exception of a legacy of fifty pounds for the new chapel which Roger had set his heart on having built.

"Mebby," said he, "I'm to be like David, as got together the wood, an' the stones, an' the gold for the temple, nobbut the Lord wouldn't let him big it hissel. He telled him he must leave it to them as comed after him. I doubt I was over much set up with myself, an' forgot that the best we can do is nobbut like bairns' work. The Lord lets us do bits o' things for him just to pleasure us like, but He does the main feck on it hissel."

Roger leaned back exhausted, and for awhile only the scratching of the lawyer's pen broke the silence of the sick room. At last the will was made out. Two of the neighbours came in to witness to it, and went away again. Marget began to settle her husband down comfortably after his fatigue, and Mr. Wimsley, begging her not to come down on his account, cautiously descended the narrow staircase into the sanded kitchen, where Jessie was standing before the fire stirring something that was simmering in a pan. She lifted it on to the hob, and turned round as the lawyer entered.

"My dear," said he, seeing her anxious face, "I don't think really that you need distress yourself about your uncle. I was called in to a case precisely similar not very long since, and the party recovered in the course of a week or two. Still, he has certainly been quite right in wishing to settle his affairs. It is always better, decidedly better, to have these little matters properly arranged."

Jessie's face brightened. Her uncle was not so very ill then after all, and she felt almost as if Mr. Wimsley, by giving her the assurance, had been himself in some way the instrument of his safety.

How pretty the little thing looked, thought the lawyer to himself, as he watched the glad smile flashing into his face!

"Good-bye, my dear," said he, in his most endearing tones. And taking her hand in both his own, he pressed it with what Jessie felt somehow conscious now was really a significant grasp.

She did not like it quite, but she could not get her hand away at once, he was holding it so fast. The only thing she could think of was to repeat her apologies for having brought him out so late, and to thank him again for having done so.

But her broken speech was cut short in an unexpected way.

"Nay, nay, if I must be thanked, let me choose my own way."

And stooping down to the flushed fair face, the enamoured lawyer stole a sudden kiss from Jessie's rosy lips.

She started back, shy and amazed. She was not indignant, there was too much simplicity in her for that, but she was extremely uncomfortable. She felt herself growing red all over. She neither knew how to speak nor what to do, so embarrassed had she been by the lawyer's demonstrative salute. There was a creak on the stairs, too. It was her aunt's step. What would she think to find her thus blushing and disordered, with her hand still imprisoned in Mr. Wimsley's grasp?

But her confusion was of short continuance. Mr. Wimsley heard the step too, and when a moment after Marget entered the kitchen, he had disappeared, and Jessie was there alone, just reaching up to fasten the topmost bolt of the outside door.

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CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH MR. WIMSLEY MAKES UP HIS MIND.

ROGER need not have been in such a hurry, after all, to get his affairs settled, for his illness, as the lawyer had predicted, took a right turn instead of a wrong one. In the course of a few days, the doctor allowed him to sit up for an hour or two at a time; then, with some difficulty, he managed to creep down the narrow stairs, and into the kitchen, where Marget fixed him up with plenty of cushions in the big elbow-chair by the fireside, put the little round table beside him, with the great Bible and hymn-book upon it, and plied him assiduously with the various dainties on which sick people, who are getting well, are privileged to live.

Meantime, Mr. Wimsley, having broken the ice by his professional visit at the cottage, had fallen into the habit of "dropping in" two or three times a week, ostensibly for the purpose of inquiring after Roger, and having half an hour's chat with him by the fireside, but in reality for the sake of pressing Jessie's hand in his when he said "good-bye," and of bestowing soft looks upon her, which he felt sure she was beginning now to understand, for how charmingly the little thing coloured up now and then when she met an unusually tender glance; and with what a pretty, shy quietness she sat, bending over her work, when he went in to have a chat with her uncle. For the chance, too, of saying that one word to her which he was beginning to be impatient now to utter, and which should enable him bravely and openly to lay claim to divers little favours which he was persuaded, in his own mind, she was only waiting to bestow, until he should have given himself the title to receive them.

But somehow, Fortune had ceased to be propitious. Whenever he went, Jessie was either out of sight upstairs, or busy in the other kitchen, or she was sitting boxed up behind the table, bending over her work, and hardly looking up once during the whole time he stayed.

It was tantalizing, certainly; however, the lawyer consoled himself by the reflection that this was, in all probability, only the veil with which the little innocent thing tried to hide the feelings which doubtless were stirring in her breast on his behalf. He was not quite sure yet about Reuben Leaf, though he had seen his father one day, and had been informed by him that he had decided on putting his son into the farm at Haxby. And he had had some little trouble, too, in persuading himself that he was doing exactly the right thing, in some respects, in this project of marrying Jessie. He was afraid people would be inclined to talk when they found he had chosen Roger Lee's niece for a wife. Perhaps some of the better class of Marton society might hardly be disposed to call upon her after she had become Mrs. Wimsley. Not even her golden beauty, he was afraid, would be a sufficient recommendation in the eyes of the well-to-do dowagers who had occasionally favoured him with a share in their attentions.

It would not be exactly pleasant, either, to have the blacksmith himself dropping in with his awkwardly cut coat and provincial dialect, just when he had brought in a client to have one of his very small glasses of wine (Mr. Wimsley, on principle, always used the taper glasses in preference to the full-bottomed ones.) But as soon as Jessie was in his own hands, he meant to put a stop to any frequent intercourse with her uncle's family. If he did her the honour to raise her to a superior position in society, of course the least she could do would be to learn to accommodate herself to it; and really, setting aside her unfortunate connexions, the girl herself was everything he could desire, for he had looked pretty sharply into her ways during those visits at the cottage, and had found her in every respect admirably fitted to answer the various purposes of a wife.

She could cook to perfection; and Mr. Wimsley liked good living when it could be combined with economy. She was as still as a mouse about the house; and he agreed with Shakspeare, that quietness is an excellent thing in woman. Just now, perhaps, while his courting was going on, a little more playful chatter might be an improvement, but a talking wife, he reflected, would prove a terrible nuisance. And Marget herself was an admirable housewife, and no doubt she had trained her niece in her own notable ways.

Her manners, too, were much above her station, for being a dressmaker, and accustomed to work a good deal at ladies' houses, she had somehow caught quite a superior knack of speech and deportment; indeed, in her simple, quiet dress, she looked almost a lady herself — the little lovely thing, as warm and glowing as a ripe peach upon a sunny wall.

Yes, he had done the right thing; there could be no doubt about it, taking everything into consideration. There was not such a bewitching little creature for a dozen miles round Marton. And now to business. The lawyer had been sitting at his office desk, his hands run through his hair, ruminating on these various particulars. He roused himself now, and looking out some papers, made two or three copies of a note, which at last he wrote out fairly, folded, and addressed to "Miss Jessie Lee, Marton."

Then he put his head out of the green-baize door that opened into the house, and called to Mrs. Green, his housekeeper. She came out of her kitchen at her master's summons, and stood just within the office door, smoothing down her apron, and waiting, with her sharp, cat-like look, for his commands.

It was something unusual, she was sure. If he wanted anything he generally called Nancy, the maid-of-all-work, or else sent the office-boy for it. Mrs. Green was particular in her ways, and disliked being interrupted when she was busy about her work during the morning. She disliked it also when she was sitting down comfortably to her sewing in an afternoon; and when tea was over she generally went out on her own account for an hour or two, coming back about eight o'clock to get her master's supper ready.

And Mr. Wimsley was very careful not to interfere with these little peculiarities; for Mrs. Green was a valuable person, very. She knew all his likes and dislikes, and managed to make him exceedingly comfortable, and in an economical way, too; moreover her wages, considering her capabilities, were extremely moderate. It would be a difficult matter to replace her if she happened to get offended; and if she was not quite so amiable, perhaps, as she might be, and was apt to speak her mind with considerable asperity at times, why, patience was a virtue; and though Mr. Wimsley would have scorned to own it even to himself, he was secretly not a little in awe of his housekeeper's tongue.

And of all this Mrs. Green was quite aware, as her master, in a tone of half-apology, requested her to slip on her bonnet, and take his note down to the village.

"And be sure, Mrs. Green, that you give it into the hands of Miss Lee herself; and if she is not at home bring it back again. Nancy and Parkes are both of them so careless, it is not safe to trust them with anything, and it would be of consequence if the note were lost."

Mrs. Green took her master's letter, and said, "Very well, sir," without giving any signs of dissatisfaction. Mr. Wimsley felt relieved. He had been afraid she might take it ill being sent out in the middle of the afternoon in this way. He took a turn or two up and down his office, and then sat down again and went on with some writing, on which he had been engaged when he had fallen into the train of meditation that had resulted in the letter he had just despatched.

Mrs. Green went upstairs at once, put on her black silk bonnet and shawl, and then sat down on the edge of the bed with the note in her hand to deliberate upon it. She had been afraid of this for some time. It was not for nothing, she had been quite sure, that her master had gone down so often of late to Roger Lee's house. There was no telling what men would not do when their heads were turned by such a pretty girl as Jessie Lee; for she was pretty—there was no denying it. Mrs. Green knew what was what as well as her master. She had not lived lady's-maid for ten years with some of the best families in Bedesby without seeing a good many young ladies there who were reckoned to be beauties, and Jessie Lee could hold her own with the best of them.

But Mrs. Green did not like her any the better for that. Beauty was very well for those who had it, but it might prove troublesome sometimes to others. Her pretty face might make her Reuben Leaf's wife, and welcome. She could see very well that the young miller had an eye after her; but to have her taking the rule over *her*, as Mrs. Wimsley, was quite another thing.

Mrs. Green had an easy place of it, and took her own way in everything pretty much as if she had been actually the mistress in the house. Her master gave her shabby wages, it was true; but one way with another she managed to make them up to what she would have got elsewhere. There was no harm done, she reasoned with herself, for she took no more than her due, and if people will be mean, why they must expect to be put upon sometimes. True, she flared up now and then, but she did it on purpose, just in order to make her master afraid lest she should throw up her situation. But as to really leaving, that was the last thing she meant to do; and, if she could help it, she would not have a mistress either—least of all a young person to whom she had more than once paid eighteenpence a day to come and work for her, bringing her up her meals from her master's table.

Mrs. Green felt in considerable perplexity as she sat turning the letter over and over in her hands. She wished she durst open it and find out what there was inside, but it had been too carefully fastened up to make it safe for her to do that. Then she held it up to the light, but not a stroke of the pen shone through the thick blue envelope,—

"Miss Jessie Lee,
Marton."

She would be obliged to give it to her, much as she would have liked to keep it back; but that would not be safe either. What was to be done?

Mrs. Green pursed up her lips and shut her eyes. Then she looked in the glass again, straightened her shawl, settled her bonnet-strings, and sallied forth with the letter in her hand.

She supposed, as doubtless the reader does, too, that the letter in question contained the avowal of her master's sentiments towards the object of his choice. What else should he have to write about to her, and why should he be so particular to have the letter given into her own hand, and brought back to him if she were not at home? There was no answer either. Of course not. Jessie would not be likely to frame an answer in a hurry to such a message as the one Mrs. Green was taking to her. In short, every circumstance connected with her errand looked unpleasant and suspicious.

Yet after all, notwithstanding her acuteness, Mrs. Green was mistaken in her conjectures. Mr. Wimsley knew a great deal better than to make his proposal to Jessie in a letter. And, indeed, that is one of the most foolish things that a sensible man can possibly do, even if he is as sure of his answer as the lawyer was of his.

A woman must be very anxious indeed about the matter before she can sit down in cool blood to write a formal acceptance of an offer of marriage. It is positively almost as bad as having to put the question herself. She will try it in a dozen different ways, and end after all by a reluctant refusal, not because she really means to say "No," but because she cannot for the life of her muster courage to write that open, unblushing "Yes." A lover who seriously intends to win the hand of his mistress will beware how he exposes her to such an ordeal. At best it is but a cowardly way of sparing himself at her expense, and if a woman has any proper spirit about her, she sees that she has been taken advantage of, and resents it accordingly. True, it is a terrible business for a man who feels that everything depends on the cast of a single die, to nerve himself up to the point necessary to do the thing in the legitimate way. But even in this, as in so many other things, "*Il n'y a que le premier pas qui coûte.*" When the plunge is once taken, and the first shock over, it is astonishing how easy the whole affair becomes, and how potent he finds the murmured words when accompanied by the appealing look, the tender tones, the silent beseeching clasp of the passive little hand, which makes it as hard to refuse the petition so eloquently enforced, as it would have been to grant it if otherwise preferred.

The contents of Mr. Wimsley's letter, then, were of quite a different character from what Mrs. Green supposed. It merely requested Miss Lee to favour him with a call at his office before six o'clock that day, if possible, as he had something of importance to communicate to her. And, by good fortune, the housekeeper had hardly got half way to Roger Lee's house when she met Jessie coming down the village, tripping along with her little work-bag in her hand.

She looked most provokingly pretty, as Mrs. Green could not help thinking, in that little brown cloak and straw hat of hers, from beneath which her face shone forth like sunshine in a shady place.

"Well, to be sure, Miss Lee!" said the housekeeper, stopping as she came up to her. "How lucky it is I have met you! Here's a note for you from the master. It's something particklar that's in it, for I was to be sure and give it into your own hand; and if you wasn't in, I was to bring it back again. Though why he couldn't tell it you hisself, it passes me to say. He's down your way pretty often. Maybe it's something as he'd rather Reuben Leaf didn't hear," she pursued, seeing that Jessie did not seem disposed to open the letter in her presence. "I daresay he's at your house most evenings, isn't he?"

"Indeed he isn't," exclaimed Jessie, surprised into an indignant denial of the housekeeper's insinuation. "He hasn't been down more than two or three times this month past."

"Well, now, to hear that!" cried the housekeeper, casting up her eyes in well-feigned astonishment. "You do surprise me! And it's all over the town that you're to be Mrs. Reuben Leaf before another spring's turned, and me saying as much to the master this very morning." (Mrs. Green!) "And, indeed, the person that told me said she had it from Jane Robinson, and she's own cousin to George Davis that married Mary Leaf; so if she doesn't know what's going to happen in the family, I don't know who should."

"I'm sure it isn't true, not a word of it," burst out Jessie; "and if anybody says anything about it to you again, you can tell them it isn't.

He's never said a single word to me that he mightn't say to any one else in Marton, never!"

"Well, well, my dear!" said Mrs. Green, nodding her head sagaciously, "then if he hasn't, it's only because he wants helping a little. Young men often do. Take my word for it, if you play your cards well, you may be Mrs. Reuben Leaf before this time twelvemonth. And a nice likely young man he is too, so steady and well conducted, and behaves so well to his mother; and it says a deal for a young man, does that. If he's good to his mother, he'll be good to his wife an' all. I allays says that. So I wish you good luck, Jessie, and a speedy bargain to you both."

Jessie was impatient to get away. Mrs. Green's conversation was very trying.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Green. I wont keep you standing if you are going farther." And then she hurried on, leaving Mrs. Green looking after her, not satisfied yet, but feeling that she had made a happy stroke, and done the best thing that was possible under the circumstances.

"Only make the girl think there's a chance of her catching Reuben Leaf, and she'll none take up with an old carle like our master. Folks don't eat dry bread when they can get buttered, and no harm neither. You won't make spring-flowers sort with stubble fields. It would be a pity to marry a nice young girl like that to a man old enough to be her father. An' mean too he is, to say nothing of the bother it would be having her about."

Mrs. Green was a faithful servant when it served her turn, just as her master did his best by the old squire when it did not interfere in any way with his own interests to do so. Further than that her sense of duty did not compel her to go. She went on as far as the baker's shop, where she bought some crumpets for tea, and then turning about she went back home, wondering all the way what Jessie Lee had thought of the contents of her master's letter.

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CHAPTER X.

SOUR GRAPES.

MEANTIME Jessie walked rapidly on, Mrs. Green's words still ringing in her ears. "It was all over the village." Suppose it should get to Mrs. Leaf's ears—and there was no knowing how gossip might spread—she would think she had been trying to entangle Reuben into marrying her. She was sure she had never done anything to encourage him, and yet she had noticed a good while past that Mrs. Leaf always looked uncommonly cold and stiff when Reuben had lingered by her side coming out of church. And he, too, she fancied, seemed to dislike his mother seeing them together; nor had he come often lately to her uncle's, as he used to do.

It was too bad, Jessie thought, that all these things should be thrown against her. Perhaps it would get about next that he had jilted her. What should she do? She felt as if everybody she met had heard about it. And then she lifted her hand to brush away a tear that was just starting to her eye, and recollected the letter that Mrs. Green had given her.

She had forgotten it in her agitation, but now she opened and read it. What could it be that the lawyer wanted so particularly to tell her, and why could he not have said it some time when he came to the house? A cruel thought flashed across her mind. Mrs. Leaf had heard these reports about herself and Reuben, and had commissioned Mr. Wimsley to speak to her about them. That must be it; and he had sent for her to his office, that he might tell her quietly, without her uncle or aunt, or any one, knowing about it. It was very kind of him. He had been very kind since her uncle's accident, though she had not always liked his showing it so much. She wished she could get somewhere out of sight, and hide away from it all. But there was the letter in her hand. She had better go at once, and have it over and done with. She should feel easier when the thing was done.

And then she would not let herself see Reuben again when he came to the house, and she would try and keep out of his way coming out of church. Mrs. Leaf should see she had a spirit of her own; and if the miller did live in a better house than her uncle, and his wife could afford to wear silk gowns for every day, why, that was no reason that other people should not hold up their heads as well as they.

Spite of her gentle ways, our little Jessie was very sensitive and very proud; too proud, perhaps, for a village dressmaker. If she had been a lady she would have been considered exclusive. As it was, the Marton people thought she was rather high, and kept herself to herself more than was necessary. Jessie liked to be always nicely dressed. Not smartly, she knew better than that. And she was very particular about whom she walked out with, and did not approve of being called "Jessie," except by people who knew her very well indeed. And though she knew quite well—what pretty girl does not?—that she was fair, and would not have changed her beautiful bloom and golden hair for anything you could have given her, yet she was apt to be offended if any one praised her beauty to her face, and put a silent mark against every one who jested her about being married.

So as she walked slowly towards the lawyer's office—for she was very determined when she had once made up her mind about a thing—she was trying to weave around her a prickly case of indifference and independence. And though her heart was beating as if it would leap out of her breast, she knocked bravely at the office door, and followed the boy who opened it for her straight on into his master's little sanctum. There sat Mr. Wimsley at his desk, with his papers spread out before him, looking very cadaverous in the cold green light that came through the closed blinds of his office window.

He got down from his high stool when Jessie came in, and placed a seat for her just beneath his desk. Then he remounted to his place, fixing himself so as to have a commanding view of her, leaned his elbows on the desk, placed the tips of his four fingers and thumbs roof-wise together, and looked down upon his visitor with a prefatory "Hem!"

"You received my note, of course, Miss Lee?"

"Yes, sir," answered Jessie, in a whisper. Her heart was beating faster than ever. Somehow she was not feeling so prickly just now as before she came in.

"You would naturally feel somewhat surprised at its contents. But the fact is, the nature of the communication referred to required it to be made strictly in private."

"Yes, sir," murmured Jessie again, thinking of Mrs. Leaf, and twitching nervously at the strings of her hat.

The lawyer noted these little signs with complacency. They showed a becoming sense of diffidence in his presence, that would sit well upon his future wife. He had carefully rehearsed during the day the part he intended to perform in the scene before him. He felt that so much might depend upon a suitable impression being made to begin with. Jessie must not suppose that she was to be ardently wooed and hardly won by her admirer. It was entirely owing, he believed, to their heads being filled with this conceit, that women often proved so perverse and difficult to deal with after they were married. He meant, on the contrary, to lay a pre-marital hand firmly on her at the outset. He would make her feel the weight of the obligation that he was about to confer upon her. Afterwards he would reassure her by various little endearments, which doubtless would be as agreeable to her as to himself.

It was with considerable satisfaction, therefore, that he perceived the evident agitation of his subject. Altogether the affair was progressing as favourably as he could desire.

" You are probably aware," he went on, " that I have bestowed considerable attention lately on your conduct and appearance. Indeed, I may say, ever since the time of your uncle's accident. Of course I had a motive in this, and, as the results have proved upon the whole satisfactory, I sent for you to-day, in order to communicate to you my intentions. In short, Miss Lee, I have decided, notwithstanding your position in society, which is your chief drawback, to select you in preference to the other young ladies of Marton to be my wife."

Jessie gave a great start, partly of relief, partly of astonishment. It was nothing about Mrs. Leaf, then, after all. But Mr. Wimsley's wife! What did it all mean?

"You are surprised, my dear," said the lawyer, who had now got to the second part of his programme—"naturally surprised at your unexpected honours; but, indeed, it is this very modesty which to me has been one of your greatest charms. And now we may consider it a settled thing, and I shall take the first opportunity of speaking to your uncle on the subject."

With these words, he descended from his stool, and was proceeding to insinuate his arms gently around her waist; but Jessie started from him.

"Oh, no, sir! Indeed, I am sure I never thought about this. I am very sorry, but I couldn't, indeed I couldn't. I didn't know what it was you were meaning."

Jessie's refusal was not quite so neatly worded

—she was young and inexperienced, and besides had not had the advantage of a previous rehearsal.

Mr. Wimsley, thus unexpectedly repulsed, regarded her in blank amazement. The thing had got wrong somehow.

"Jessie Lee, do you know what you are saying? I have offered to marry you—to make you my wife; and an excellent match for you, too—a great deal better than anything else you could have expected. Come, Jessie," he added, in a smoother tone, "think better of it. You won't get another such a chance in a hurry." And he took her little hand persuasively in his own.

But Jessie pulled it indignantly away. It was certainly ill-considered of the lawyer to say what he did, for she bridled up directly, and answered with a pretty mingling of pride and confusion—

"Indeed, Sir, I am very much obliged to you for thinking so well of me; but as to being your wife, it is of no use saying anything more about it. I never can, and I never will, and nothing in the world shall make me. And as to making a good match, it is what I don't care about a bit, for I needn't be beholden to a husband for a home; and if I was, I'd rather starve than sell myself to one I didn't love."

There was a dash of temper in Jessie's answer, or she would never have got through it all; and now she sat glowing and trembling after her little burst of excitement, looking rather defiant, it is true, but sadly too pretty for the lawyer's peace.

Mr. Wimsley was nonplussed for the moment. No girl in her senses, he thought, would ever let such a chance slip, unless she were in love already. His suspicion fell at once upon the right person.

"You are hankering after Reuben Leaf, Jessie," he said, assuming an air of fatherly concern; "that's where it is, and a sad pity, too. Take my word for it, no good ever comes of trying to entangle young men against the wishes of their family."

Mr. Wimsley had touched the galled place, and he saw it, too, for the girl shrank as if in pain at his words, and knotted her fingers nervously together. There was truth in what the lawyer said, though there was cruel falsehood too; yet the two seemed so cunningly entangled, that Jessie writhed helplessly in the meshes he had cast around her, unable for the moment to extricate herself. Her power of speech had forsaken her, and she felt that her confusion, her silence, her burning blushes, were so many tell-tales loudly proclaiming the secret which till now she had hardly acknowledged even to herself. This love, which, while hidden deep within her breast, had been so sweet and precious, made her feel somehow guilty and degraded, now that Mr. Wimsley had dragged it out to view in that little green lighted office.

Those cold, keen eyes of the lawyer seemed to pierce through and through her poor little heart, reading there all the tender hopes which she had whispered to herself in the silence of her white-curtained chamber; all the emotions of budding, unformed delight, which had thrilled her with such delicious startled joy when she had stolen away by herself to feel over again the pressure of Reuben's close clasp upon her hand, as he had bidden her good-bye after his visit to the cottage.

And they did see a good deal. They saw a new beauty in the quivering lips and heaving breast; they saw, too, that it was more than doubtful now whether he would ever be able to call it all his own. And though he was inwardly raging at Jessie's disdainful way of rejecting his advances, yet the girl felt instinctively that he was enjoying the confusion with which his words had so evidently overwhelmed her.

"I feel it right to warn you, Jessie," he continued, after feasting for awhile in silence upon the sight of her crimsoned cheek. "And although you have strangely forgotten yourself, and spoken in a most unbecoming manner for a young person in your position, yet if you make a proper submission, as I have no doubt you will when you have cooled down a little, I shall be quite willing to overlook this unfortunate freak of temper, and re-instate you in my good opinion. But as to Reuben Leaf, you are only preparing disgrace for yourself by thinking about him; and I should be very sorry if you were to bring trouble on a respectable man like your uncle. A young man means no good by a girl when he goes courting her on the sly, especially if she is much beneath him, and as nice-looking as you are, my dear."

The lawyer had edged nearer and nearer to Jessie as he spoke, and was now possessing himself again of one of her hands. But Jessie, her confusion and embarrassment stung through by his touch, snatched her hand in indignation from him, and sprang to her feet, glowing with anger and wounded pride.

"It's false," she cried, "and you know it is, and it's mean and dastardly in you to say it. Reuben Leaf is a better man than you a hundred and a hundred times over. And he has never dared yet to give me a word or a look that he'd be ashamed for any one to know. And as for trying to entangle him, it's what I should scorn to do, or to disgrace myself either. And you only say it of me because you think other people's hearts are as rotten as your own."

She looked almost dangerous, the little slight thing, as she stood there, all a-quiver, her blue eyes flashing forth such an angry light. There was a force just then radiating from her that completely overpowered the lawyer, making him quite oblivious of her beauty, and anxious only that she should take herself away.

But Jessie did not wait to enjoy her triumph. She dashed out of the office, leaving the bewildered lawyer to recover himself at his leisure, and had got out of Marton, and half a mile on the road to Bedesby before she cooled down sufficiently to remember where she was, and that she had set out originally from home on her way to the doctor's house, to take the measure of a morning dress which she was making for Miss Jemima Stinson.

By degrees Mr. Wimsley gathered back his faculties after their sudden dispersion by Jessie's outburst of tempestuous disdain. He remounted his high stool, and took the affair into impartial consideration.

His ears were tingling still with those last words of hers. What a little fury she could be when once she was fairly roused! Perhaps it was as well that he had got his eyes opened in time. It would have been unpleasant, to say the least, to have found out, when it was too late, that he had got a wife who held such a whip of scorpions in her hand. For there was no denying it, the little thing did get the upper hand of him. He felt himself smarting still from the effects of that stinging cut. Mrs. Green could be acrimonious upon occasion, but when she was at her worst it was never anything like this.

After all, he reflected, since the grapes *were* so sour, it was a good thing he was not obliged to set his teeth on edge with them. Reuben Leaf might if he liked. He had nothing to say against it now. And besides, Jessie was pretty to be sure, and young, but that was all. Now he came to think of it, since he had to choose, he would prefer a wine with a little more body in it. Your sparkling Moselle was very well in its way, but for leisurely enjoyment there was nothing like a glass of good, full-flavoured port.

The widow Lupton, to whose party he was going to-night, was worth a dozen little shrimps like Jessie. There was hardly more than a handful of one, whereas the other would be a comfortable armful. His thoughts reverted to her as she had appeared on the occasion of the last evening party given at Marton, by Mrs. Stinson, the doctor's wife. At this party Mr. Wimsley had had the pleasure of conducting the widow in to supper, of keeping her plate supplied with an abundance of the choicest dainties on the table, and finally of adjusting her shawl around her capacious person before handing her into the cab that was to convey her to the snug two-story house which she was occupying *pro tempore,* that is, until such time as she should have secured a successor to the late Mr. Lupton.

Mr. Wimsley turned the matter over, looked at it in every possible direction, and finally concluded to transfer his affections from the impracticable Jessie and fix them on the widow.

This done, he drew towards him a sheet of paper and wrote a letter to Mr. Leaf, in which he said that he found it would be impossible to accommodate the Marton Methodists with the piece of ground they were desirous of obtaining for the site of their chapel. Then, office hours being over, he went to refresh himself by a turn in his garden before it should be time to dress for Mrs. Lupton's party.

Thither he repaired, on matrimonial thoughts intent, punctually at seven, the hour indicated on the scented mauve-coloured note which had conveyed the invitation.

The widow's rooms were well filled, well lighted, and prettily decorated. She had succeeded in gathering around her most of the *élite* of Marton society, with the exception of the families from the Rectory and the Priory House. There was also a sprinkling of the better class of farmers and tradespeople. And now Mrs. Lupton moved among her guests, scattering her smiles broadcast around her, gracious to all, yet nicely apportioning her favours to their respective positions in the social scale.

For there was caste in Marton, and it would not do for the widow of a deceased maltster of ample means to associate on terms of equal familiarity with Mrs. Leaf, the miller's wife, and the two Misses Curlew, elderly young ladies of condition, who had a brother a clergyman, and whose father had been a barrister.

Mrs. Lupton was a woman who had been a belle in her youth, and even now by candlelight was tolerably effective. Moreover, she knew her own "points," and availed herself of them accordingly. On this particular occasion the lawyer thought to himself that he had never seen her look so well. Her black net bodice, with its scarlet trimmings, seemed striving in vain to restrain the amplitude that heaved above it. Her cheeks were glowing with a deeper carmine, her eyes with a brighter light than ever. Once the lawyer thought of Jessie, but before this dazzling luminary she paled and faded like a star before the harvest moon.

Mr. Wimsley became as demonstrative as the nature of the circumstances allowed. The widow saw her advantage, and anew directed the whole artillery of her charms against the heart of her susceptible admirer. The fortress surrendered. There was no mistaking the signs of capitulation. And then the provident dame, who had wisely made provision for possible contingencies, conducted her captive, on pretence of admiring her plants, to the little greenhouse which had been dignified by the title of conservatory.

What took place there it is unnecessary to relate. Suffice it to say that Mr. Wimsley availed himself of the opportunity thus considerately afforded; that the widow, being taken by surprise of course, blushed and hesitated, smiled a little and sighed a little. Finally, with a silence more eloquent than words, put her plump white hand into that of the lawyer, and a few minutes after, having a second time achieved her destiny, returned triumphant to her guests—her eye a little brighter, her bloom a little deeper than before—Mr. Wimsley's affianced bride.

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CHAPTER XI.

BY THE RIVERSIDE.

THAT man is not lightly to be despised, who may be seen on a sunny September afternoon, with good health, good prospects, and a good conscience, every thought at rest, no single anxiety tugging at his heart, standing at ease, leaning with folded arms upon a five-barred gate, waiting for a girl as gifted, pretty, and affectionate as was Janet Brande. One who, like her, looks up to him with that shy hero-worship so pleasant to receive, bringing in return for the regard he may be pleased to bestow upon her the sweet rare gift of woman's friendship, unmingled with those stinging drops that make the spicy draught of love so dangerous an indulgence.

And this Mr. Maudsley was doing, or at least thought he was doing, as he leaned with folded arms on that five-barred gate in Marton wood, waiting for Janet Brande, who was to meet him there at three o'clock; for he had been the day before to take leave at the Priory House, where both Miss Mildred and her brother had expressed their appreciation of the advantage it had been to Janet to see him paint, and their hope that she would show her sense of his kindness by endeavouring to profit by his instructions after he was gone.

And Mr. Maudsley had received their acknowledgments in his frank, pleasant way, saying that Miss Janet—he always called her Miss Janet before others—had been of considerable service to himself in so readily taking the trouble to sit for him. Finally, he concluded by requesting that she might accompany him the next day to a place a little distance down the river, where was a sketch which he thought, with a few hints, she might work up into a very pleasing picture; and Miss Mildred had agreed, with just a little hesitation, perhaps. But, then, who could refuse a request made with such a grand easy air, and yet with such a suave deference to herself, that the maiden aunt really felt she was conferring a favour by granting it?

And so it was that he stood here this afternoon, watching the little blue figure which had just appeared in sight. I do not think that it came into his mind, as it had done into Janet's a hundred times to-day, that this might be the last time he would see her; or, if it did, the thought brought with it no twinge of sorrow. He had felt a genuine pleasure in the society of this brown-haired girl. He liked her fresh, unstudied talk, pouring itself out before him like water sparkling from a mountain spring. He liked her eager, impulsive ways, all the more pleasant, perhaps, because of the little dash of girlish wilfulness sometimes displayed in them. Her perfect gracefulness of form, her wild fawn-like beauty, had satisfied his artist eye. Perhaps, too, girl as she was, her unconscious flattery had not been quite without its charm. It was pleasant to see the dark eyes upraised with such undoubting confidence to his, to read in their liquid depths her child-like reverence for himself. And he had genuine satisfaction, too, in watching her nature unfold beneath his influence, as a flower spreads its petals to the sun; but that she should repay his interest in the perilous coin of love was a possibility that never crossed his mind.

He had never said a word to her that might not with perfect propriety have been uttered in the presence of another—never looked with other than an artist's eye upon that fresh fair face, never pressed her hand with that lingering touch that only lovers care to use, and yet instinctively, unconsciously, as in a darkened room plants stretch their leaves towards the light, so all the tendrils of her young life were reaching out, clasping and twining themselves around him with all the strength and tenacity of first and girlish love.

Until his coming, Janet had lived a life of entire seclusion, healthy in many respects, inasmuch as her mind retained a perfect purity and innocence of much which, to girls brought up in the midst of society, or herding together as in schools, rubs off the first fresh bloom of ripening womanhood; yet, with all this, she lacked that gradual experience of life which only intercourse with others can supply. She had not learned as yet to train or to restrain herself. She was impulsive and susceptible, and as circumstances swayed her, so she moved. There was much in her which had never met with a response from those among whom she lived—many fair blossoms of sweet womanly emotion, waiting only for the sunlight to expand them; and now into her quiet twilight life, like a sun rising from the under world, came this intercourse of hers with Mr. Maudsley. The morning clouds were all dispersed. Everything seemed steeped in golden light; all nature spoke to her pleasantly. What wonder that the girl learned to love him who had shed this brightness over her life!

Happy Janet! Loving, yet knowing not that she loved; loving with that fresh girlish love that gives all, knowing not with what it parts,—as the mountain heather flings its perfume on the breeze,—content only to sun itself in the looks that are light and life itself.

But now she has come quite close to the gate and stands on the other side, flecked over with the sunlight that dripped upon her through the feathered foliage of the great ash-tree overhead.

"Oh, Mr. Maudsley, I am so sorry I have kept you waiting, but indeed I could not help it. Aunt Mildred wanted me to tie down some preserves. She has been doing her greengages, and I have had to sugar and brandy-paper them, and cover and label them; such a business it was! I have come as fast as ever I could."

"Don't trouble yourself, child," said Mr. Maudsley, leaning still upon the gate and looking kindly into her flushed, eager face; "I have not been tired in the least, and I have not wasted my time either. I have got a new idea. Look at the trunk of that beech-tree, how clearly the shadows of those leaves are cast upon the smooth bark; you might suppose some one had painted them upon it in a neutral tint."

"Ah, how beautiful!" exclaimed Janet, turning to look at it; "every little spray so distinctly drawn. This dear old wood, you are always finding something fresh in it. It has been my friend ever since I was quite a little child. You cannot tell, Mr. Maudsley, how many things it has taught me—things, you know, that I could not have got out of books."

"I daresay," said Mr. Maudsley, with a smile, thinking perhaps, as he watched her glowing countenance, that no books could have taught the girl what she had learned from the sweet companionship of Nature.

And then, seeing that he was waiting to help her over the stile—Janet had ceased long ago being so independent about this little matter—she mounted to the topmost rail, and putting her hands in his, sprang down lightly to his side. They did not take the road past the Hall, but struck across by-and-bye into a path that led through the wood down to the water. There they walked along together, talking as they went, for nearly two miles, until they reached the bend in the river where was the place which Mr. Maudsley wanted Janet to try and sketch. The river was broad here and shallow, with high craggy banks grown over with brushwood and bending trees; and in a little nook just removed from the water's edge, stood an old tumble-down cottage with whitewashed walls and ragged thatched roof all stained with moss and lichen—just a study for an artist, though not all, perhaps, that might be desired for a human habitation.

"Now, I think, if you try," said Mr. Maudsley, "you may make a very pretty little thing of this. It will be far better for you to do something of your own, even if you do not succeed at first, than to spend your time in only copying other pictures."

Then he showed her how to begin the sketch, and from what point it would be best to take it. And after giving her all the hints he could, to which Janet listened very eagerly, as indeed she did to everything which Mr. Maudsley said, they turned and began to retrace their steps towards home.

It was far on in the afternoon now. The sunset light was falling upon the water, turning it here and there, as it wound through the meadows, into a stream of rippling gold, and the shadows of the trees on the outskirts of the wood, which had grown longer and longer as they walked, stretched away till they nearly reached the water's edge. They sauntered slowly on, more silent now than they had been as they went. Janet was beginning to feel how near, how very near, she was now to the last moment after which she should see Mr. Maudsley no more. A hundred unformed thoughts were swelling in the poor child's heart. She had so much that she wanted still to say to him. If she could but make him understand, without putting it into words, how grateful she was to him, and how great and wise and good he seemed to her, and what a little wee mite she felt herself to be, and how she longed to grow worthy to be his friend, and how sorry and lonely she knew she should be when he was gone.

And full of these thoughts, unconsciously she lingered as she walked, till Mr. Maudsley, supposing from her flagging steps that she was weary, proposed that they should rest awhile before they proceeded further.

So they sat down on a knoll under an ash-tree, and Janet looked out over the brown stubble fields on the other side the river, across to the pale blue line of the Wold hills that shut in the horizon, with eyes that could not see very clearly for the unshed tears that dimmed them now. She sat quite still; she did not like to trust her voice to speak. She felt sure that if she said anything Mr. Maudsley would tell directly how very near crying she was. By-and-bye though, there came unawares a great sobbing sigh, and then Mr. Maudsley, looking down at her, saw the big glistening tear which she could not keep from falling.

"My dear child," he said, in a soothing tone, "what is it? I have tired you. I should not have taken you so far."

"Oh, no," said Janet. And, almost without knowing what she said, the words came out, "I am so sorry you are going."

She hid her face in her hands, for the tears were raining down hot and fast.

Mr. Maudsley did not speak. He had not thought of this. Perhaps he did not exactly know what to say. But he did—the very last thing certainly he should have done, though what I daresay many a man beside himself would have done in his place—he put his arm silently around her and drew her to his side. And Janet let him do it. He had become her law. Somehow, too, it felt quite natural that he should. In all her life she remembered no warmer embrace than that of old Hannah, who used to pet and fondle the motherless child until she grew too big for such caresses. Her father's absent kiss, her aunt's formal salute, were so different from this warm, tender clasp, which seemed to tell her she was dear.

And she had no soiled consciousness that should make her blush at the magic sense which that circling arm conveyed. She surrendered herself to it as to a delicious dream that has fallen into the midst of a distressed and wakeful night, and leaned down her head upon his shoulder with as little thought of wrong as the snowdrop that bends upon its stalk. Poor child! she was thirsty for love, longing for it as the parched land longs for the shower. And now she felt it falling on her, flowing around her, covering her with its shining waves.

She nestled more closely against Mr. Maudsley, with a deep sigh of content, as he drew her nearer to himself. It was so new, so sweet thus to tell out to him all that he had been to her. And everything was so still, nothing to disturb this peace that brooded over her. The sunset clouds hung motionless behind the bushy crowns of the willows on the opposite bank of the river. A water-rat came out of his hole, looked about him with his bright black eyes, and then scuttled with a splash into the stream. Now and then a linnet, hidden among the thick foliage of the ash beneath which they sat, shook out over their heads a momentary shower of song. A brown leaf fluttered down upon Janet's glove; she looked up with a smile as Mr. Maudsley brushed it away, and then took the little hand into his own and pressed an answer back.

He was no Stoic. He liked to feel the brown head resting so contentedly against him, and to look down upon the dark fringed lashes that lay upon her cheek. And withal there crept into his breast that sweet sense of satisfaction, which few men can resist when their influence is thus unconsciously acknowledged. He wished, it is true, that she had not been so distressed at the thought of parting from him. Yet even this had its pleasant side. He liked to feel that he was soothing her. Poor child! If he could but convey by this caress as much tender solicitude as would tide her over his departure, and serve to comfort her when he was gone. And with the thought, he stooped his head over the rippling curls and kissed again and again the white low brow that gleamed beneath them.

It was a momentary impulse. He was vexed with himself directly after, for Janet drew herself away with a crimson blush upon her face.

"I must go home now," she said, hurriedly. "Aunt Mildred will wonder what has become of me," and stooping down, she picked up her hat from the ground, and began with trembling fingers to fasten the strings.

Mr. Maudsley saw her embarrassment, and felt vexed with himself for having caused it. He looked at his watch, to give her time to recover herself.

"Come, Janet," said he, "it is later than I thought;" and he drew her hand within his arm. "I must help you along. Are you rested now?"

"Oh, yes," said she, in a quick, eager way; "let us make haste. I must not be late home."

And then, as they mounted the bank, she stole a hurried glance from beneath the shadow of her brown straw hat at her companion's face. There was just the same pleasant smile that she had seen there so often before, the same keen kindness in the bright grey eye. But he did not talk to her again; and Janet went along by his side, feeling half uncomfortable still, until they came again to the gate that barred the path in the middle of the wood.

Mr. Maudsley let go her arm, and crossed the stile; then he stood on the other side looking at her with a gay smile upon his face.

"Do you remember the first time I helped you over here?" he said, as he reached out his hands to her.

Janet gave him one of her bright glances. He spoke in just his old, easy tone; his look was no way different from what it had been before. Perhaps, she thought, he had not noticed her confusion. It had been so foolish of her to behave as she did; and then, as if a weight had been lifted from her, she put her hands into his, and crossed the stile.

But he held them still fast in his.

"I must say good-bye now, child. So I shall not see you again."

Poor Janet! The old sobbing sorrow came welling up again into her heart at these words of his. But she pressed it bravely back, and looked up brightly in his face.

"Good-bye," she said, warmly. "I am glad to have known you. You have made me very happy. I shall be grateful to you as long as I live."

"You are a dear child," said Mr. Maudsley, in spite of himself. And if he had yielded to his inclinations he would have followed the words by another kiss on the fair, upturned face. As it was he recollected himself, and only said—

"I shall not forget you either as long as I have my Madeline. But I must go now; so good-bye again. Mind you don't neglect your painting when I am gone."

And with a parting smile he let go her hands, and crossing the stile again, turned away down the path leading to the Hall.

Janet stood by the gate watching his receding figure as he went rapidly along under the trees. There was a bend in the road; he would be out of sight directly. Ah, if he would but turn just once, so that she might see his face again. But he did not; another moment, and the grey boll of an old beech-tree had hid him from her eyes. And then with a strange new want hollowing all her heart, Janet Brande went slowly home.

⁂

CHAPTER XII.

THE LONDON EXPRESS.

WHEN Janet came downstairs the next morning, more heavily and wearily than for some time past had been her wont, she saw her father's driving-gloves and whip lying on the table in the hall. He must be going to take the chaise to Bedesby. All at once a thought flashed across her mind that made her heart flutter quickly, and brought back the light again into her eyes. If she could but think of something that wanted getting at Bedesby, and persuade Aunt Mildred to let her go there with her father! She did go with him sometimes if there was any little shopping to be done, and her aunt was not disposed to take the drive herself.

And then Janet had her little plan behind it all. She could make some excuse, and go by herself to Bedesby station. The London train started at two o'clock, and she would go to the ladies' waiting-room and get one more glimpse of Mr. Maudsley. She could watch him behind the window-blinds, and he would never know that she was there.

The foolish child! And yet who, reading these pages, does not remember deeds or wishes just as foolish, which yet, like this of hers, had on them something of that blush and bloom of early love which is, of all things, the purest and most beautiful in these hearts of ours, which so soon grow soiled and selfish as they learn the wisdom of the world?

Janet was planning and considering all breakfast time how she might best make known her request to her aunt; when, to her unspeakable delight, Miss Mildred herself proposed that she should go with her father in the chaise to Bedesby. She wanted some knitting-pins and some crimson wool for a winter shawl which she was about to knit.

"And your papa is sure to make some mistake," she said, "if he gets the things. Gentlemen always are so stupid about such matters; and I cannot spare a whole day to go myself."

So Miss Mildred made out a list of other small purchases which Janet was to make; and after breakfast was over, the chaise was brought to the door, and she and her father started.

It was a meeting of the Philosophical Society which Mr. Brande was going to Bedesby to attend; rather a long one, too, for when he left Janet at the inn where he put up, he told her he should not be back much before three, and bade her be ready then for starting. Janet had abundance of time before her; she went first into the town, made her purchases, and had the things all laid ready for packing in the chaise long before two o'clock arrived. The station was not more than five minutes' walk from the inn, so that she had not far to go; and with a beating heart she went quickly down the street, and turned in at the great iron gates that led on to the passengers' platform.

It wanted nearly twenty minutes to two still. She was glad of that; Mr. Maudsley would be sure not to have arrived yet, she thought; and she would not for worlds he should encounter her. She glanced anxiously around her as she walked down the station, for the waiting-room was quite at the farther end. However, she reached it safely, and slipping quietly in, took her place behind the shadow of the window-blind to watch.

She had hardly been standing there a moment when she heard a whistle, then there was a cloud of steam, and the express from the north came panting in. Instantly the platform was one scene of bustle and confusion; the passengers were getting out of the carriages, stretching themselves after their long ride, or rushing round in hot haste to the refreshment-rooms to get a cup of coffee or a plate of soup, during the ten minutes that the train was allowed to stay.

As she was looking on, a lady, closely veiled, and with a large tartan plaid wrapped round her, came hastily into the waiting-room.

"How long does the train stop here?" she inquired, in a sweet ringing voice, of the woman who was in attendance.

"Ten minutes, ma'am."

"Ten minutes only? Can you tell me where I shall get a cup of coffee? I see no refreshment-rooms anywhere."

"The refreshment-rooms are on the other side of the station," replied the woman. "You must go round there, and you will find them."

And she went to the window, and pointed out the way.

"So far. Ah! I dare not venture. I would be afraid of missing the train."

"I could tell them to bring you a cup of coffee here, ma'am, if you like," said the attendant.

The lady thanked her.

"I should be glad if you would," she said, as the woman went out quickly.

She returned in a moment or two with a waiter, bringing a cup of coffee on a tray. The lady sat down to take it; and throwing back her veil, revealed a countenance of almost dazzling beauty, fair and brilliant, with eyes of a blue like that of evening skies before it deepens into night, and a profusion of thick golden hair, somewhat disarranged apparently by her long journey.

Janet glanced at her for an instant, and then turned again to the window. Her mind was full just now of one thought only, to catch a parting glimpse of Mr. Maudsley. She watched and waited some minutes longer. The bustle on the platform thickened fast. Porters and passengers were hurrying to and fro. Doors were banging, luggage being brought up and rattled into the van, or dragged up to the tops of carriages. At last he came. From far Janet caught sight of the noble form and tawny head. How fast her heart was beating now! How her eyes shone with excitement; how eagerly they followed that one figure which just now was all the world to her!

He stopped opposite a carriage door, when he was still some distance from the window at which Janet was standing. The porter, who was bringing his portmanteau after him, thrust it into the carriage. Then Mr. Maudsley got in, and two other passengers after him, and the guard shut and locked the door. The bustle began to subside; the train was nearly ready now to start.

"Any one here for London?" cried a guard at the door of the waiting-room.

The lady started up, and at the same instant the man who had brought in the coffee came back for the cup.

"Sixpence, ma'am, if you please."

"My purse!" exclaimed the lady in evident dismay, as she felt hastily for it in her pocket, that she might pay the man. "I have surely left it in my travelling-bag in the carriage."

"Time up!" cried the guard at the door, and at the same moment a bell rang.

"Here is sixpence," exclaimed Janet, who had her purse luckily close at hand. "Take it, pray," for she saw the lady hesitate. "You can give it away for me in charity. It will be all right then."

"Thank you—thank you!" said the lady, eagerly, as she took it with a brilliant smile of thanks; and paying the man, she drew down the thick veil which completely hid her face, and hurried out of the room to the carriage, at which the guard was standing ready to hand her in.

The next moment the shrill screech of the whistle was heard, and the long line of carriages which Janet had been so anxiously watching moved out of the station. She strained her eyes as the one in which Mr. Maudsley was, passed the window. Just a glimpse, she caught, no more, and then he was gone—gone; and she was standing by the window with such a sense of aching want within her, as it seemed just then that nothing but his return would ever still.

CHAPTER XIII.

JANET! JANET!

IT would be more than a month after this parting from Mr. Maudsley, that Miss Mildred sent Janet one afternoon on an errand to Marget Lee's cottage. Janet always liked being sent out in an afternoon. She missed then the long task of sewing with which her aunt expected her to employ herself after dinner; and of all kinds of work, plain work was what Janet disliked the most.

And on this particular afternoon, Janet had such delightful thoughts to occupy her mind as she danced along through the wood, too happy and light-hearted to restrain her steps to any soberer pace. For this morning—could it really be that such a joy was hers?—she had had a letter from Mr. Maudsley; such a dear, kind letter, telling her that he had finished his "Madeline," and now that the picture was in the frame he could almost think he saw her standing there herself. And he had said something that made her feel so glad, so very glad, about the service she had been to him while he was painting it at Marton. It was so sweet to know that she had been of use. All she had seemed so little to offer up to him, and yet out of this little she had been able to give him that which he cared to have. And he had told her so in this letter; and then there was something more about his remembering the time they had spent together, and about her having made his stay at Marton very pleasant to him; and he inquired how she was going on with her painting, and whether she was likely to be coming soon to London; and he had told her that when she did, she was to be sure to come and see him.

And this letter, when it had been read all round—for Miss Mildred and her papa saw it as well as herself—Janet had carried all day in the bosom of her frock, taking it out from time to time to read over and over again, until she had made every precious word her own. She was thinking about it all the time that she was going through the wood, and so pleasant was the theme that she quite wondered when she found herself at last at the Lodge gates, and crossing the road to Marget Lee's cottage.

It was a pretty cottage, this of Marget's, with its long garden, which from spring to autumn was one perpetual blaze of bloom. People always stopped to admire it when they came to the village. Such a cozy little home it looked as it stood in the sunshine this afternoon! So snug, and trim, and bright, with its low buff-washed walls, that harmonized so pleasantly with the warm brown of the tiled roof, upon which were sprinkled patches of richly tinted lichen, purple, olive, and russet, running up into little mounds of emerald-tinted stone crops, brightened here and there by their tiny flowerets of glossy gold.

Old Matthew, Roger's father, was sitting on a bench just outside the door. The old man lived in a house of his own, a little way down the village; but he often hobbled up with his sticks on a sunny day, to spend an hour or two at his son's for a change, amusing himself as old folks do by watching what was going on. He sat now basking in the sun, steadying his palsied hands on a big oaken staff, and leaning his chin upon them, while he looked out with the dim, purposeless gaze of age, over into the road beyond the garden. He rose when he saw Janet coming up the walk, and had just tottered up on to his legs, when the young girl reached the cottage-door. She laid a kindly hand upon his rough frieze coat, and pressed him back into his seat.

"Nay, nay, Matthew, sit still," she said, raising her voice a little, for the old man was hard of hearing; "is Mrs. Lee in?"

"Ay," said Matthew, in his quavering treble, "she's i' the hoose."

But Marget's quick ear had caught the sound of Janet's voice.

"Come here, Miss Janet, an' sit ye down," she said, as she came to the door, her fingers still busily clicking her needles over the ribbed worsted stocking which hung down half a yard in front of her blue checked apron.

Janet followed her into the cottage, which wore its usual look of afternoon brightness. The polished walnut drawers, the pewter mugs hanging on the delf-case, the brass candlesticks on the chimney-piece—all were glittering in the sunlight.

"How bright your kitchen always looks!" said Janet. "I wonder sometimes when you get your cleaning done. There never seem to be any signs of it about."

"It does na do itsel', Miss Janet," answered Marget; "but ye see I wasna bred to let the sun see me sleeping ever. Whenever it rises, I aye rise too, and lang afore o' winter mornings; and when ither folks is rubbing their eyes, I'm rubbing my tables an' chairs. An' then, ye see, I rub wi' a will, too; for I aye like Roger to see a canny ingle neuk when he comes in fra the smithy. It's ill for a man when he comes hame sair dune wi' trachling at his work, an' no a quiet place to sit down in at his ain ingle. It gars him gang where mony a man gangs for peace, an' that's to the public, though his wife, puir thing, doesna ken aiblins that she's driven him there hersel'."

"You are right there, Marget, I dare say. There is Job Travis, our gardener. Aunt Mildred says she is sure it is nothing but his slatternly home that is making him so unsteady. He is at the Cross-Keys nearly every night in the week. And such a nice, pretty-looking woman as Lizzie Travis used to be. It is a pity she can't make his home comfortable for him."

But Marget, in her wise way, never spoke about people and their affairs, unless she had something good to say of them. Perhaps this was the reason that, Scotchwoman as she was, most of her neighbours had a good word for her.

"Ay, ay, Miss Janet," she said, ignoring the allusion to Job Travis, "a young man may like fine to sit out in the sun, daffin wi' his lass; but when his pow wears frosty, like our Roger's, he aye seeks a cozy bield wi' his wife; an' if she doesna give him that, she may spare her kisses; he's no wanting them. But when you've a man o' your ain, Miss Janet, you'll ken what it a' means."

Janet coloured up a little.

"Is Jessie at home, Marget?" she asked. "I have a message for her from Aunt Mildred."

"She's gaen owre to the rectory," answered Marget; "but she'll be back the noo, if you can bide a wee. But sit ye down here, Miss Janet," she added, shaking up the cushion on the chintz cover. "It's mair lightsome by the window, an' you'll see Jessie come down the yew-tree walk. She winna be lang, I'm thinking."

Janet took the seat with a smile of thanks.

"What a beautiful flower you have here! I never saw one like it before," said she, admiring a little plant which stood in the window, gemmed over with its thick clusters of coral-like bells.

"'Deed is it, Miss Janet; it's one our Jessie reared last year fra a cutting that Reuben Leaf gave her. An' that's another, a rarer kind, in that little pot. It's a gey bonnie flower, an' it thrives well wi' her. Aiblins ye'd like a slip of it yersel', Miss Janet; she'll be proud to give ye one."

"Indeed I should, Marget, if there is a little one that can be spared." And as she spoke, Janet bent down to look more closely at the flower.

"Ye mind me o' your mither, Miss Janet," said Marget, pausing in her knitting, and looking over her spectacles at the young girl, upon whose bright falling hair the sunlight was shimmering through the screen of green leaves that filled the cottage window.

"Do you remember my mother, Marget?" said Janet, softly.

"'Deed do I, Miss Janet. I mind seeing her at the kirk the first time she went after your father brought her to Marton. How bonnie she lookit as she came up the aisle in her white marriage dress, wi' her saft still een, an' the smile that seemed aye glinting owre her face. An' a' the folk streeking their necks to get a sicht o' the bride. She was a gey bonnie leddie, an' your father thocht a' the warld on her. Mair's the pity she was taen awa sae sune. You'll no mind her yersel', Miss Janet. Ye wasna owre twa, three year auld when they laid her i' the kirkyard."

"I don't remember her when she was living," said Janet, in a hushed, solemn voice; "but I recollect papa taking me to see her as she lay in her coffin, and my wondering that she should be so still."

"She didna lie lang afore she dee'd; but she was aye frail, puir leddie, for a' she was sic a happy-like creature. An' sae thochtful; I mind as if it had been yesterday seeing her come dancing doun the yew-tree walk just like a glint o' sunshine through the green gloom, wi' her hands fu' o' spring flowers that she'd pulled for our little Easie on her way through the wood. 'An',' says she, 'can you give me a dish, Marget, an' I'll pit the flowers in for Easie to lie an' look at.' She had a weakness in the back, had Easie, puir bit lassie, and couldna rin an' jump about the braes like ither bairns, but wad lie on that couch the day lang. I tell't her I hadna ane, barring the parritch-plates an' the kail-dish. Sae, says she, 'Give me a parritch-plate, an' put yon glass tumbler in the middle.' An, Miss Janet, if ye'd seen how bonny them twa, three wild flowers lookit when she'd dune!—sae different frae the posies that folk like us make—just the flowers a' crushed up in a bunch, sae that they havena room to breathe. But this was for a' the warld like a flower-fountain, wi' a wreath o' broad green leaves covering the markings o' the parritch-plate, an' blue forget-me-nots hiding in among them. An' in the tumbler she pat some saft green meadow-grass, wi' lang bending blades, that hung out owre the flowers. An' her wee white handies lookit so bonnie wi' the rings a' sparkling on her fingers as they flittered about in the sunshine."

"Then you knew her quite well," said Janet, in the veiled voice she had spoken in before.

"Oh, ay, Miss Janet. She often used to come in here to see my little Easie. She was just as free an' as pleasant, I could talk with her as if she'd been ane o' the neighbour's wives. An' the bairns outbye wad rin an' touch her goun an' look at the rosebuds owre it. An' yet she'd a way wi' her that you'd ha' kenned, if she'd been dressed in a linsey petticoat and short gown, that she was a leddie. She'd a look in her e'en that garred you keep your distance. They was like your ain, Miss Janet. Only hers was saft e'en wi' a glint o' pride in them, and yours is proud e'en wi' a touch o' saftness in them."

Janet's face was turned from Marget. The softness had overflowed the pride in her eyes now, and a look of infinite longing and tenderness crept over her countenance as she gazed through the lattice windows of the cottage into the deepening gloom of the yew-tree walk—the walk along which, years ago, this young mother of hers had been wont to come.

She almost started when a bit of fluttering blue drapery came in sight from behind the black boles of the old trees. It was only Jessie, and presently the young girl had crossed the road, and was standing on the threshold of her aunt's kitchen. She smiled and curtseyed when she saw Janet, and laying down her bag, received the instructions which Miss Brande had sent by her niece.

"And my aunt told me to say," continued Janet, "that she should be glad of you for a day or two in the house in about a fortnight's time, if you could come. She is having some things altered for the winter that she could not very well send out to do."

"I am very sorry, ma'am," answered Jessie, colouring, "but I am afraid I shall not be at home then. I am giving up the dressmaking, and going into a situation."

"Indeed!" said Janet, in some surprise; "I had no idea you were about leaving Marton."

"Her uncle and me was baith on us sweir to pairt with her," interposed Marget, knitting away vigorously at her long grey stocking; "but she couldna be easy to bide any longer at Marton, and this seemed to hand out. Sae we just let her have her ain liking."

"And where are you going, Jessie?" inquired Janet, who felt as if she must say something, and yet saw that somehow the subject was a sore one to both aunt and niece.

"To London, ma'am," replied Jessie.

"It's to be with the widow of the Laird of Allanblae," said Marget. "She's gane to live with a nephew in London that's a bachelor, an' she wants some one to read tull her an' sew for her. No just a maid, ye ken, Miss Janet. Sae when

Jessie heard on it, naething wad serve but she wad gang. You see she's frail the noo, is the leddie, an' she hasna ony bairns of her ain to crack tull her when she's her lane."

"Well, Jessie," said Janet, rising, "I hope you will be comfortable. But we shall be sorry to lose you from Marton. We shall hear of you sometimes though, through your aunt."

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said Jessie, with a faint smile. But somehow the words seemed to fail on her lips, and feeling sorry for her, she hardly knew why, Janet took her leave, and crossed over the road again through the Lodge gate on her way home.

By the time she had passed the Hall and got into the wood, she had forgotten all about Jessie. Her own happy thoughts were thronging round her again. Once she sat down by the side of the path on a trunk that had been felled, and taking out her letter, read it again, lingering over each sentence which already she knew by heart. Ah, what a treasure that letter was to Janet! Then she folded it up and went on her way again. Every now and then as she tripped along under the trees, she stood quite still for a moment that she might feel her happiness. Surely the air was more transparent, the sunshine fell in brighter gold through the wind-stirred trees, lighting up the green depths of the wood. The harebells rang out a sweeter chime from their fairy bells. She could have clasped the very trunks of the grey old beeches, and pressed her lips to their withered boles. If he did but know how glad he had made her. "But some day," she thought, "I will tell him all. I will grow worthy to be his friend—I will, I will. I have something to live for now. Ah, I did not think I could have been so glad!" And Janet kissed the letter that she held in her hand, as though she would tell in this voiceless language what words had not leave to utter.

And then alone there in the wood, with no eye upon her but that of the little brown squirrel, scrambling hastily up the mossy boughs of the tree beneath which she passed, none to hear her but the startled rabbit that scuttled across her path, the girl felt a flush rise to her face and a flutter, that was not fear, trembling at her heart.

Ah, Janet! Janet!

CHAPTER XIV.

FAINT HEART.

WHEN the news reached the mill that Jessie Lee was going to London to a situation, Mr. Leaf wondered what ever could possess the girl to leave a good home like her uncle's and take her chance out at place. Mrs. Leaf gave a complacent little smile at the prospect of having her thus safely out of the way. And Reuben, in trouble and perplexity, resolved within himself that come what might, he would, if possible, get his love declared, and learn from her own lips whether he might hope that it was returned or no.

But though Reuben had made up his mind as to the course he would pursue, his courage failed him each time that he attempted to put his resolution into practice. Twice he went to the cottage with the fixed resolve to ask Jessie to be his wife, and twice he came away no nearer to his end than ever he had been. Nay, it seemed as if he were even further from it, for certainly Jessie was far cooler to him now than she used to be, and, as he fancied, tried rather to avoid him than otherwise.

And as Jessie grew more distant towards him, which it must be owned she did, so Reuben grew more timorous in the presence of his divinity. There was nothing in reality so very extraordinary in Jessie. She was a very lovely and very loveable young girl, but if Reuben had looked narrowly around the circle of rustic belles with whom he was acquainted, he might have found one or two, almost, if not quite, as charming as Jessie, with whom, nevertheless, he could laugh and joke quite easily; whose waists he had clasped often in the country dances, without that strange tremor that thrilled him through if Jessie's little fingers did but touch his own.

It is often thus with a strong man's love. Your slight sensitive lover reaches out a fearless hand, and grasps an unresisting prize. It is the young Hercules who quails and trembles before the one little form, the thought of whom sends the blood with such a torrent through his veins.

And so it was that Reuben put off his declaration, day after day, until at last it could be postponed no longer. Jessie was going on the morrow. He must tell her all, cost him what it might. He must, he would; and armed with fresh determination, he set off to Roger Lee's house after the mill was shut, resolved that before he returned, he would, if possible, win from Jessie the promise to be his.

But when Reuben reached the cottage, his heart sank within him more than ever. There was Jessie to be sure, looking a little sadder, perhaps, and quieter than usual, but in Marget's bright, sanded kitchen there was also quite a circle of company sitting around the fire. Mrs. Grant from the Hall, old Michael Bray, and the lady's-maid from the Rectory, who had all stepped in, like himself, to have a parting word with Jessie.

Reuben felt awkward and confused. How could he say what he wanted with all these people sitting by? If he had found it almost impossible even when he had been alone with her, as he had for a few minutes the last time he came, it was tenfold more impracticable now. The young man chafed and raged in secret as he drew in his chair among the rest, and joined in the talk that was going on. He felt just then as if they were all banded together in a conspiracy against him. He would have given anything for one five minutes alone with Jessie. But there she sat at work in her corner behind the table, hardly so much as once lifting her eyes to him.

And the evening wore on so fast. Mrs. Grant got up to go, and the lady's-maid with her, and after awhile old Michael tottered off on his rheumatic legs. The big clock in the corner struck nine. Marget rolled up her knitting and skewered it together with the empty needle. Roger drew towards him the big leather Bible, from which night and morning he read a few verses out of the Psalms or Gospels before offering up his simple prayer for daily mercies or nightly rest. Jessie alone went swiftly on with the net cap-quilling she was making. The filmy ruffle lengthened fast beneath her busy fingers. There would be a good many yards ready for her aunt to use, when she herself was no longer at home to do it for her. There was no help for it. Reuben saw now that he must go. But, indeed, if he stayed any longer, it would still be of no avail. He could not say anything to Jessie of what lay so heavily upon his heart, while her uncle and aunt were sitting there.

He gulped down the choking sense of disappointment, and, rising desperately, shook hands with Roger and Marget; and then Jessie, too, rose and laid down her quilling. He would hold her hand once more in his, he was resolved; but, poor fellow, he could not quite control his voice to say good-bye or wish her a pleasant journey on the morrow. He only looked in her face as she spoke to him, and, looking, saw an unshed tear that glistened in her eye. Perhaps she was thinking sorrowfully of her departure; perhaps—but, ah! that could not be the cause; if it were, she would hardly go away and leave him thus, without one word to bid him hope. For he felt sure she knew he loved her. Fool that he had been not to have told her all!

He did not know how tightly he was wringing the little hand he held, or whether he spoke to her at all as he left the house; but a moment after he found himself outside the cottage-door, standing in the dark, alone. It was all over; the last chance lost. He started off swiftly down the village. He must fight off by action this sickening sense of disappointment that was swelling at his heart. He hardly knew where he was treading until he found himself nearly at the end of the village; then for a moment he stopped, and leaned against the posts of a gate by which he was standing. A wave of passionate regret was sweeping wildly over him, plunging him helplessly beneath its mighty flood. He lifted his head, gasping, bewildered, half-suffocated. He *could* not give her up. He felt strong enough for anything just now. He would go back to the cottage, go boldly in and tell his love in presence of them all. He could but fail, and anything was better than this terrible uncertainty.

He turned at the thought and retraced his steps, swiftly at first, then more slowly and irresolutely. He neared the little bend in the road against the plantation-gate; another moment and he would be at the cottage. He stood still for an instant, nerving himself for the effort. Five minutes more and it would all be over, and his fate decided. If Jessie was his, he would know it; if not——. He went desperately forward. His hand was on the latch of the white wicket-gate; and then he saw by the faint starlight that the cottage-windows were barred up, only from the little lattice casement above the door a light was feebly glimmering. It was Jessie's room; he knew that by the box of mignonette that was outside it. It was too late, then; it was too late. He might go home now; he had lost her, and there was no other woman in the whole world worth winning.

Poor Reuben! If he could but have known that at that moment Jessie was sitting on the edge of her little white bed, weeping as if her heart would break, thinking, not of her morrow's journey, with the new, untried life to which it was to introduce her, not of the pleasant little home which she was leaving for that of a stranger, not of her uncle and aunt even, dearly as she loved them, but moaning, as she swayed herself to and fro—

"Oh, Reuben, Reuben, if you loved me, why did you let me go?"

But he knew nothing of this; he saw only the dim outline of the cottage, with the vine clambering over the gable, and round the little window that shone out a warm spot in the gloom. With a bitter sense of loss, all the harder to bear because he felt that but for himself it need not, perhaps, have been, he turned away. There was nothing left to care for: that one little hand had rifled his heart, and left it desolate and empty. And yet it was even then ready to give him all again, ay, and a thousand-fold beside.

If only he had known! But so it is: we wander as if blindfold through this life of ours, and the chance that from all eternity has been journeying towards us, meets us, almost touches us. It needs only that we put out our hands to grasp it; yet we pass it by unknowing, and the next moment it is lost to us for ever.

CHAPTER XV.

WAITING.

BUT after this first letter of Mr. Maudsley's, which had made her so happy, Janet never got another. She had written an answer to it, not at all such as she would have wished to write; for Miss Mildred had examined it and altered it, and made her put out a great many things that she had said; so that when it was fairly finished, Janet felt that it was very different indeed from what she would like to send. And to this letter no answer ever came. Janet expected one for a long time; then she almost gave over hoping. The Marton woods grew brown and leafless; the December blast shivered off the last red leaf from the great beech-tree in front of the Priory House.

The winter crept wearily by, but still no news of Mr. Maudsley ever reached Marton; none, at least, that came to Janet's ears, though she believed they heard of him now and then at the Rectory. But though she longed above all things to learn something of him, she could never bring herself to make any inquiry, and neither the Canon nor Alison ever chanced to mention his name in her presence. But Janet seldom saw Mrs. Birney now. The season had been unusually severe, so that even after the Canon came home from his winter's residence at Bedesby, Alison had been kept almost constantly indoors, and Janet was always too shy to go much to the Rectory without receiving an express invitation.

Perhaps if the Rector's daughter had known what a resource these visits were to the lonely girl, she would have sent for her more frequently. As it was, Janet was asked from time to time to meet other young ladies of Marton; and not caring much to make herself agreeable to them, and disappointed at not getting a quiet talk alone with Alison, or the opportunity of a rummage over the shelves of the Canon's library, she was generally so dull and constrained, that Alison began to fancy she did not care to come.

And at home she grew listless and despondent. There was not much outward change in her, except that she was quieter than she used to be, and sat longer and more patiently over her work, which in her aunt's eyes was an improvement, and Miss Mildred did not notice anything else. But then she could not look within, and read all the sad thoughts that were sickening the poor little heart, as Janet sat bending over her sewing.

Yet all the time the girl was pining in the midst of her little round of tasteless pleasures and irksome occupations, of unsatisfying companionships and chilled and cramped affections. She was wanting something to appease the restless craving for excitement which alternated with her moods of hopeless apathy. And of all this Miss Mildred knew nothing. How should she? If she had, she would perhaps have lectured her niece on the folly of giving way to such fancies, and sent her out twice a-day, instead of once, to take a walk.

She did notice, though, that Janet was spending more time than she ought over her music—not steady practising, which Miss Mildred would not have so much objected to, but singing over and over again by herself, vehement, passionate songs, or else little dreary ditties, that she declared at last were as bad as a crying child in the house.

"Really, Janet," she said, coming severely into the drawing-room one evening after Janet had slipped away as usual in the twilight to solace herself after this melancholy fashion, "I cannot have you crooning continually over those old things; you make every one as doleful as yourself. If you want to practise, do it properly, and play your pieces regularly through; and do try to put a little more energy into what you do. You are always in one extreme or other, either so wild that you quite shake one's nerves, or else as dull as a November day."

Janet received her aunt's reproof in silence. She waited till she had gone back to the dining-room, and then went upstairs to her own room, and fastening the door, sat down to have a good cry by herself. She felt sore all over; she could not bear any one to touch her, even by a word, and her aunt's words were so sharp, they cut into her like a knife.

She hardly knew why she felt so miserable, but she knew she was so. Everything about her seemed stupid and uninteresting. Her old pleasures had lost their charm; the things that once made up her life seemed to have fallen from her and left her stripped and desolate. People did not care about her as they used to do. Even Alison Birney was not so kind as once she was. Worst of all, that little fire of hope that she had tended so long in secret, had died out at last into cold grey ashes. She had fed it as long as she had anything left that she could heap on to keep up the flame, and now that the last faint spark had flickered out, her little world seemed all dark and chill. What had she done that she should not be happy, like other people? She shivered in the cold silent chamber, and put her little starved hands into the bosom of her frock to warm them. And all the while she felt the slow drip, drip of tears falling in her heart and from her eyes.

Then she heard a knock at the front door, and Bessie running through the hall to open it. It would be her father, most likely, come home from Bedesby. He had gone there in the morning to a meeting of the Philosophical Society.

She lifted her head and looked round the room. She had been sitting there for more than half an hour, and it was geting late now. The twilight came greyly in through the little diamond panes of the lattice window. The shadows were creeping out of the corners of the room, and from behind the cumbrous oaken wardrobe and the heavy old-fashioned chairs, whose worm-eaten carvings had been gathering their blackness for well-nigh two hundred years; for the furniture in this room had all been made soon after the building of the Priory House, when the Brandes, though even then an ancient, were not yet a decayed family.

Everything looked cold and dismal; yet Janet felt that somehow she would rather have it so. Why should things be pleasant without, when all was or dreary within? The girl's sorrows were more than half imaginary. Yet she hugged them the closer for that, cherishing them half-jealously, as the young often do in their first heartaches, before they have felt the iron that enters into the soul, the branding grief that leaves its scar even when the wound is healed.

She leaned her wet face down again into her two hands. Oh, how she wished she could go to sleep, and never wake up again! What was the use of people living, unless they were happy? And she did not think she should ever be happy again. There was nothing to make her so. If she could but go away somewhere, a long way off, where there was no one who knew her, or who would speak crossly to her when she was sad—where there would be nothing to remind her of the happy days that would never come back again, or of the dreary life she was leading now; no dull abstracts of Rollin and Hume, no tiresome tasks of sewing or darning, no sitting still all the evening in the dining-room when Miss Gale or the Miss Curlews came to tea!

Just then she heard her aunt's voice calling to her from the foot of the stairs. She started up—

"Yes, aunt, I am coming directly."

She bathed her face hastily with cold water, rubbed it all in a glow, that the signs of tears might not be seen, and then ran downstairs and into the dining-room.

Coming out of the dim chamber, the bright light dazzled her for an instant. Then she saw that her aunt was not there, only her father standing over the fire, and a stranger with him, whom Janet did not remember to have seen before.

She stood for an instant, uncertain whether to go forward or to beat an immediate retreat. But the gentleman had turned round.

"Is this your daughter, Mr. Brande?" he said, putting out his hand to her.

Mr. Brande had forgotten to introduce her; he never did think of such things. He repaired his omission now.

"Janet, this is Professor Elston, the gentleman who wrote the 'Geology of Palestine.' You said once you would like to see an author."

"And this is the young lady who was kind enough to prepare such very neat and careful drawings for the book from my rough sketches. I am very glad to be able to offer you my thanks in person."

Janet answered with a shy look into his face. She was never ready at speaking to strangers, and felt a little awed by the presence of one of whom she had always heard her father speak with such respect as ranking among the most eminent geologists of the day. Besides, she had not left all her gloomy thoughts behind her in her room; and she began to be conscious now of her red eyes, which she was afraid the gentleman might notice.

Happily, Bessie knocked at the door, and put an end to her embarrassment by saying Miss Mildred was inquiring for her. Janet went out, and found her aunt in the kitchen, looking anxiously at the contents of the larder, which Bessie had just brought out for inspection.

She looked up sharply when Janet entered.

"Why did you not come at once when you were called, Janet? Twice I had to send for you before you came. Bessie, go into the garden, and bring in some parsley to garnish this duck. It is a mercy, I am sure, I had them both cooked this morning, and this one set away to be cold. So thoughtless of your papa to bring people in to stay in this way, without saying a word about it beforehand! And of all times in the year, too, just the very day that Hannah has gone out for a holiday; and Bessie is just like a post about anything that she is not accustomed to. Here is the key of the linen-press, Janet; go and fetch down one of the small tablecloths, the snowdrop pattern, and tray-cover and table-napkins to match; and take some matches and light the fire in the fawn bedroom. I had the bed in that room aired last week, so it will have to be used. And don't come away, now, and leave it to go out; just wait and see that it burns up; and bring down a pair of fine sheets and pillowcases to air."

Janet went upstairs and unlocked the great linen press that stood on the landing, filled with fine damask drapery, white as snow and sweet with the scent of lavender and rue, that had been accumulating there for generations past, as one bride after another had entered the family of the Brandes and added to the store. She chose out what her aunt wanted and took them downstairs. Then she ran back and went into the fawn bedroom to light the fire.

It was the room her mother had died in, and was one that was rarely used. Janet would not have owned it to any one, but to her the awfulness of death seemed still to linger about the chamber. She never liked to go into it after dusk if she could help it. If she did, she always saw in fancy the quiet cold face, as she remembered it so long ago, when her father had taken her in to see the young mother lying in her death sleep, and had lifted the white covering and showed to her the pale still countenance that lay beneath. It was the first and only remembrance Janet had of her mother, so that this room was the only one in the house in any way associated with her memory; and now she went into it half-shrinking, feeling that dim undefinable terror which it is so hard to explain and so impossible to resist.

But her aunt's orders were law. She struck three or four matches and put them hurriedly to the shavings in the grate. In a moment the pinewood chips had caught and the flame was breaking out, hissing and sputtering through the coals. It was sure to burn now; and with a deep breath of relief she ran out of the room, and downstairs to her aunt, who had just finished giving directions to Bessie about supper, and now went back to the dining-room, telling Janet to follow her.

Her father and the Professor were talking eagerly together. Janet took her work and sat down quietly by the lamp. The little bustle that had just passed over had shaken her thoughts loose from their hold on her own half-fretful fancies, and by-and-bye she found herself listening with interest to the conversation that was going on. It was about some discoveries that had recently been made in the Lias at some little distance from Bedesby, and of the numerous species of extinct animals that had been brought to light and identified by the skill of several eminent scientific men. For a moment Janet felt drawn out of herself. She had read about these things, for her father had trained her in science, as Miss Mildred had exercised her in fine needlework and "Mangnall's Questions." But it was a different thing listening to the vivid descriptions of Professor Elston, which from time to time he illustrated by little etchings in his pocket-book of the various uncouth creatures of which he was speaking.

It was so strange to see the dry bones of the valley of death come together as the thought of a man breathed the spirit of significance into the scattered fragments. She almost fancied she could see the shadowy monsters rise from their stony beds and pass in long procession through the dim distant ages. She felt quite sorry when the great clock on the landing struck ten, and her aunt made her a sign to take her candle and go upstairs to bed.

But the next morning, when she awoke, the shadow had crept down again. She was not caring for anything now. There was another long weary day to begin, and slowly, listlessly she rose and began to dress.

She drew aside the curtain and looked out of the window. Everything was wrapped in a thick white mist, that hid even the tall beech hedge at the bottom of the garden. The creepers round the casement were all dripping with the heavy moisture, and little pools of wet were standing in the hollows on the sill. Janet felt vexed. She had meant to go into the wood this morning and gather some roots of the hart's-tongue fern that she had discovered the other day in a sheltered nook. Now everything would be wet and sodden with this mist.

It was a little thing, but it made her peevish and dissatisfied, just as a twig dropped into a vessel of nearly freezing water will stiffen it into ice. Everything was against her, even the weather; and she went downstairs feeling as if she had a right to be moody and impatient.

Rollo was lying asleep at the foot of the stairs, his head curled comfortably round upon his paws. She pushed him with her foot, and called to him pettishly to get out of the way. He started up and followed her into the dining-room, where he stood with his tail between his legs, looking up in his dumb wondering way into the girl's face, with that expression of puzzled sorrow which we often see in the eyes of an animal that has been unjustly treated by one it loves.

Janet was moved by a sudden feeling of self-reproach. She stooped down and took the dog's head in her arms, and laid her cheek against his shaggy coat, as if in his faithfulness she had found something to rest herself upon when everything else seemed shifting and uncertain.

Rollo wagged his big tail with recovered pleasure. Poor fellow! he could not ask the cause of these unaccountable changes in the conduct of his young mistress; but with the sure instinct that often puts human discernment to the blush, he felt that she was in distress, and in his dumb, dog-like way, he tendered her the sympathy which was all he had to give.

Just then the postman passed. Janet started up and flew to the door. There was always in her mind the unacknowledged hope that there might be something come for her. It never had come; and morning after morning she had shut the door on Dennis Wray, with the ache wearing itself still deeper into her heart as she turned over his budget and saw nothing there for her—nothing, at least, that she cared to see.

This morning Dennis brought only a newspaper. She took it carelessly; she never cared much for a newspaper coming. But the next moment she caught sight of the well-remembered characters. It was for her, from him. Then he had not forgotten her. He thought of her still. She went back into the dining-room, Rollo trotting after her, and knelt down, trembling with delight, upon the rug before the fire.

Her mood had melted away in this glad burst of happiness. It was as if the cold grey mist without had suddenly been dispersed, and the earth lay all at once all warm and glowing beneath the noonday sun. She pressed the cover on which his hand had traced her name, close and closer to her lips. They were not so very far apart—only those few hours between them, for even yesterday he must have thought of her, written with his own hand this name of hers. She never thought of opening out the paper; enough for her thus to revel in the sense of her new-found joy.

"What did the postman bring, Janet?"

She started up as if surprised in something wrong, and hastily drew the cover from the paper.

"Only a newspaper, aunt Mildred, for me."

"A newspaper for you? Who can have sent it?"

"Mr. Maudsley," replied Janet, in that veiled, hushed voice, which to a fine ear always betrays how much lies beneath the spoken name.

But Miss Mildred was not gifted with a sensitive ear. She took the paper from her niece's hands—it was yesterday's *Times*—and began curiously to search down the columns.

"This is it," she exclaimed, pouncing on a paragraph in a long notice of the pictures in the Academy: "Madeline," E. A. Maudsley. "Really, how highly it speaks of it, too," she added, reading it half aloud, while Janet eagerly looked over her shoulder, "graceful conception, and almost faultless treatment of the subject." "It certainly promised to be a very fine picture when he was here. If we could afford it, Janet, I should very much like your papa to buy that picture. It was an excellent likeness of you; though perhaps the expression was not quite the thing."

Miss Mildred was proud of her niece. She felt as if somehow the pains she had taken with her in fine needlework and embroidery, the multitudinous reproofs which she had administered to her from childhood, had been the means of bringing about this gratifying result; for it was gratifying to know that Janet had been the original of a picture to which the *Times* itself had condescended an approving nod.

It would not do, though, to fill the girl's head with nonsense and conceit, so Miss Mildred prudently forbore further comment; and when Mr. Brande entered the room with the Professor, she sat down to make breakfast as quietly as if the Royal Academy had been Dr. Lane's school in Bedesby, intending to tell her brother about it when Janet should be out of the way.

Meantime, Janet had hidden the precious cover safe in the bosom of her frock; and now sat down to table shut up in a little dream-world of her own. This time the Professor's talk fell unheeded on her ears; she could hear nothing but the chimes of hope, and joy, and love, which rang on unceasingly within her breast. He thought of her still; only yesterday he had written her name; it was she, his Madeline, who had brought him fame. And on this scanty crumb of joy the foolish child fed her fancy, and was satisfied.

It was long past nine before breakfast was over. Mr. Brande let the coffee grow cold in his cup while he and the Professor discussed together the organic remains in the Lias. Miss Mildred, who did not feel much interested in these huge pre-adamite monsters, fidgeted a little; but Janet sat quiet. It was all one to her; she held her happiness now within herself. At last her father rose from table, and carried off his guest to the study; and Miss Mildred bade Janet get dressed and go to Marton, to Mrs. Leaf's, to inquire if she could let her have a couple of fine fowls immediately, for Professor Elston was to stay dinner, and afterwards Mr. Brande was going to drive him in the little pony chaise to the station at Bedesby.

"And tell her to let them be nice ones,

Janet; and if she has none to spare just now, go on to Mrs. Brighouse's. She is sure to have plenty, only I should prefer Mrs. Leaf's, if she has them; her poultry is so well fed, having the meal from the mill. And wrap yourself up well, Janet, for this mist makes it damp rather, and be sure you tell her to send them on directly."

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CHAPTER XVI.

A SPARK AMONG THE ASHES.

GLAD of the errand, Janet set off immediately. It was better a great deal than having to help her aunt about the house; and besides, she could think over all this new happiness quietly during her walk. She went by the high road; it was cleaner than through the wood, though a little farther round. The sunlight was breaking through the mist, giving promise of a splendid day by-and-bye, when the fog should have lifted itself away. Janet walked briskly on, enjoying the sober English landscape, with its hedgerows and fields, its grey sky, and breeze-stirred trees. Here and there was a group of cattle lying on the wet grass, peacefully chewing the cud, or a pair of plough-horses, yoked together, toiling patiently along their furrow, with the heavy-faced labourer plodding behind. By the time she reached the mill the mist had cleared quite away, and the sunlight was falling thick on the green fields and blossoming orchards, and old brown house; broken, too, into a thousand sparkles of glancing light as it fell on the spray cast up by the great mill-wheel, which was turning heavily round within its dark, damp shed, as the swift current of the Lyme rushed with a roaring sound beneath it.

Janet went round to the house door. She found Mrs. Leaf in her kitchen in the neatest and nattiest of morning gowns, busy over a huge batch of cheesecakes, which she was preparing in readiness for the next day.

For Reuben was coming of age, and Mrs. Leaf was going to entertain a great family gathering in honour of the event. The large bright houseplace was filled with the fragrant odour of fresh-baked pastry, which was ranged on dishes on the great dresser, that it might cool before being set away into the larder: cakes, pasties, puffs, open tarts and covered tarts, altogether such an array of good things as only a very important occasion indeed could have rendered necessary.

But this was an important occasion, and Mrs. Leaf intended to do justice to it. Moreover, she was bent on making a more than usual impression, for among her guests was to be a certain Miss Margery Bradshaw, the only child of one of the wealthiest farmers in the district, together with her mother; and though Mrs. Leaf had said nothing about it as yet, even to her husband, it was this young lady whom she destined, in her secret thoughts, to be the wife of Reuben. She was good-looking and good-tempered, and was none of your idle, fine-lady, boarding-school misses, good for nothing but to play the piano, and spend their husband's money on fine clothes and pleasuring. Miss Margery's mother had brought up her daughter in good, old-fashioned, notable ways; and Mrs. Leaf saw no reason why, now that Reuben was settled for himself, and ought to be looking out for a wife, she should not secure Miss Margery and her good portion for him. He seemed to have got over his fancy for Jessie Lee, she thought. He had not said anything about her lately; and now that she was safely disposed of, Mrs. Leaf saw nothing to stand in the way of her plans.

Though she was so busy just now, she dusted the flour off her hands and apron, and came forward with a smiling greeting as Janet showed herself at the kitchen door, which was standing wide open, and commanded a view of the great paved yard before the mill.

She would have taken her into the front parlour, but Janet begged to stay where she was; and then she said she should not be afraid of sitting awhile to rest herself. So Mrs. Leaf, after a little persuasion, went on rolling out her paste and lining her tins, having first sent out a message to a servant to catch and kill a couple of her finest fowls, and send them on directly to the Priory House.

Janet always liked that mill kitchen, with its big oaken rafters, from which hung at least a dozen smoked hams and sides of bacon; its warm fireside seats, its walls hung over with brightly polished tins, dish-covers, paste-cutters, jelly-moulds, turnspits, a huge brass warming-pan, and store of whips and guns,—its well-filled delf-case, its snowy dresser, its old-fashioned painted clock, and its aspect of homely ease and plenty. But to-day she thought it looked pleasanter than ever as she sat in Mrs. Leaf's large arm-chair, hearing the list of expected guests, and offering her congratulations on the coming event.

Before she went away, Mrs. Leaf made her drink her son's health in a glass of cowslip wine, and taste the great cake, which she cut very dexterously, taking a piece out from beneath, so that it might make its appearance on the table the next day apparently whole.

And then Janet set off home, her thoughts dancing joyously within her as she went lightly along, drinking in deep draughts of the fresh pure air, and feeling as if everything were laughing around her.

She went down the village and through the wood this time, for the sun was shining lustily now, and the day turning out almost hot. Sunlight, sunlight everywhere—trembling in the deep-blue waving air, sleeping soft-pillowed on the snow-white clouds, dancing among the young buds on the wind-stirred boughs, flashing from myriads of glittering grass-blades, filling the cups of the cowslips and primroses with golden light! Oh, how beautiful it was, and how happy she felt! Sometimes she went on swiftly through the chequered light and shadow of the woodland walks. Then she stood still for a moment that she might feel and enjoy her happiness, all nature seeming but an inarticulate reply to her joyous thoughts, telling out mutely her own great gladness. What a little thing had brought it all, and yet since morning everything seemed to have been made anew.

She lingered so long that it was nearly noon when she got home again, and in consequence incurred a severe chiding from her aunt, who had been waiting for her to assist in various little arrangements for the table, which she was far too particular to entrust to the inexperienced hands of Bessie, especially when company was to be present; and Hannah, who usually undertook them, had not yet returned from her holiday.

It was like changing a robe of gossamer for a linsey gown. However, Janet submitted with the best grace she could, prepared all the little et-ceteras for the table, brought in fresh flowers and green leaves for the dessert, and then had just time to run upstairs and dress for dinner.

When all was over and her father and the Professor fairly off for Bedesby, and she had helped her aunt to put away the things that were not in general use, Janet stole away to her own room, intent on a project that during her walk had come into her mind.

She must write to Mr. Maudsley and thank him for sending the paper, and tell him how glad—how very glad—she was about his "Madeline." She need not say anything about it to her aunt, yet it made her heart beat quite quick to think of what she was going to do. What a dear delight to put herself thus into communication with him again! She thought she might venture. There could be no harm in it, and she would say as little as she possibly could.

All the afternoon she wrote, one letter after another. At last she got one that almost satisfied her. She folded it up, then opened it out, and read it over again and again. She wondered so how he would feel when he read it—whether he would be as glad as she had been to get the paper. No, he could hardly be that; but she knew he would be pleased to have it. Perhaps he would send her an answer in return, and her heart fluttered fast at the thought. Should she have to let her aunt see it? She felt sure he would say something which she would rather no one saw but herself. Then she folded up the little sheet of white paper and put it tenderly, as if it had been a living thing, within the envelope. The next eyes that beheld it would be his own. She sealed it up daintily with a tiny seal her aunt had once given her for a birthday present, a griffin's head, the crest of the Brandes. He would know, as soon as he saw it, that it came from her. She held it a long time in her closed hands, she laid her hot cheek upon it, she pressed her lips upon it. She had a vague idea that somehow she could thus convey to him that unformed longing to which she could give no name as yet, that was making her tremble with excitement. He would surely feel how much more that little note contained than the few simple words which were all she had allowed herself to write.

At last she put it carefully into her desk, and turned the key upon it. She must go to Marton to-morrow, and post it with her own hands. Then she smoothed down her hair and went downstairs to tea.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH MISS GALE COMES TO TEA.

SHE found little Miss Gale in the room with her aunt. She was going to stay tea apparently, for she had her bonnet off and was sitting comfortably by the fire, netting away at a blue silk purse.

Miss Mildred often had Miss Gale to tea. She said it was as good as a newspaper having her, for she always knew everything that was going on in Marton, and had such an amusing way of relating it too, that she was really quite an agreeable companion. Besides her entertaining qualities, she always knew of any special wants among the Marton poor, and where a little help would be well bestowed. Her own means were very small, but she made up the deficiency by the kindness of her heart; and going about, as she did, contrived to do a great amount of good on what many would have considered a sufficient excuse for doing nothing at all.

Just now she had a little orphan lad on hand, whom she was trying to get into the Bedesby Bluecoat school. She had been asking Miss Mildred for the promise of her brother's vote. She had got a good many already, she said, and one among the rest that really seemed quite providential. It was from a lady who had just taken her rooms for a month, while her own house at Bedesby was being papered and painted. And then the little maiden lady began to enlarge to Miss Mildred upon the subject of her new lodger.

"It makes me very busy, as you may suppose, Miss Brande, being the first I have had this season; although, it is true, the lady has a maid of her own, who does a good deal of the waiting on her. Indeed, it was through the maid that I learned so much about her, for she told Sally, and Sally is always very fond of chattering when

I am busy in the kitchen. But, however, I am sure this morning she taught me a lesson on charity without knowing, I daresay, what she was doing. For you see, Mrs. Clyde is not a pleasant-looking person, by any means; indeed, she would almost give you the impression of having been brought up on chamomile tea. And she has her letters directed 'Gale's Lodgings,' which you know isn't quite the thing, seeing I am not exactly like a common lodging-house keeper. But really, when I had heard all, I felt quite to warm towards her, poor thing! It seems she had a husband who was very well connected—indeed, I believe he was first cousin to a baronet—but, however, he was very poor and very gay, as young men of family often are, and just married her for her money."

"Poor thing!" said Miss Mildred; "I always say myself it's a hard matter for a woman who has a fortune to know whether she is loved or not, before she is married. If she has nothing, why, she may be pretty sure she is taken for herself alone; but if she has money, it is hard to tell which it is that is wanted."

"Very true, Miss Brande. Well, this Mr. Clyde ran through everything, except an annuity—a very handsome one, I suppose—that had been settled on her for life; and then he treated her shamefully, and at last he killed himself with drinking and left her a widow, with this one son. And now, poor thing, she is going to lose him! He has got an appointment in India, and is to sail in October. I fancy, from what Sally said, that he has been rather a trouble to her too. It seems she had brought him up very strictly—very; and young men are often all the worse for that when they get old enough to have a will of their own. He studied for a barrister, but he has never followed his profession. However, I suppose this Indian appointment is an excellent thing. Some friends of his father's, I believe, interested themselves a good deal in getting it, so it is to be hoped he will settle down, now that he has got it."

And then Miss Gale hopped off to an account of the great doings which were to be next day at the mill, and then to the news that Harry Birney was coming home in the autumn, at which piece of news Janet's eyes sparkled as she looked up from her work—a fact which Miss Gale noted and put by without comment. And after that she went off to something else, till at last Janet grew tired of listening, and wished she dare go away to her own room and be quiet.

But, by-and-bye, Miss Gale called back her attention.

"And now, Miss Janet, I have got a piece of news for you, about an old friend of yours. Come now, guess what it is about?"

But Janet was not clever at guessing, so Miss Gale was obliged to help her out.

"Well, then, it is about Mr. Maudsley, who painted your picture, you know."

Janet tried to speak as quietly as she could, but her heart gave a great leap at the sound of his name.

"It is about his 'Madeline.' Yes, we had a paper this morning."

"No, no, it is more important than that," laughed Miss Gale; "and I know it is correct, for I had it from Miss Alison Birney herself, and she said it was no secret, or she would not have told it to me. He is to be married this summer to a young lady from Cambridge. I suppose she is a wonder for beauty, as indeed she ought to be, marrying an artist; though she can't be so very young, for he has been engaged to her a good many years. It seems she had an old father who had been bedridden for years, and she would not leave him even to be married. However, he died last winter, and the wedding is to be in June."

It was a scrap of gossip, nothing more, but Miss Gale's random shaft had lodged deep in a quivering heart. Janet did not speak or look. She felt for the moment a sickening, swooning feeling. Everything seemed to turn black, to whirl around her. Yet she went on mechanically with her work. No one must know what an almost unbearable pang it was under which she was writhing. Happily Miss Gale went chatting on without observing Janet's silence. When the little lady was fairly launched on the stream of talk, she generally sailed smoothly away, without troubling herself about responses from her auditors. Just then too, she had come to a part of her netting that required particular attention, so that Janet's sudden paleness passed unseen.

When she looked up again, Janet was sitting just as before, working swiftly away, with nothing to tell of that sharp stroke which seemed suddenly to have severed her whole life into two distinct portions. The Past, which lay dead behind her, and one long, dark, unending Now.

It was all she could do to keep back the cry that would have been such a relief, and to press down the tears that were starting to her eyes. It was not for long, though. After awhile Miss Gale folded up her netting, and said she must be thinking of going home. It was a good walk to her house, and she did not like going through the wood after dark. So she had a glass of wine and went away, and afterwards they had supper and prayers, and Janet was free to go away upstairs to her own room, and shut herself up with her grief.

She set down her candle on the dressing-table and threw herself across her bed, and then the storm burst over her.

She lay there long after all the house was still, drenched in tears, drifting along like a bruised and broken wreck over that ocean of tempestuous thought. She did not cry out or moan. She had no words for her woe. Her love had been like sunlight, brightening all it fell upon. Now it was quenched out, and all around was darkness. She had never put it into definite shape. This girlish love of hers for the artist had been just a vague dream of being with him, of following him wherever he might be, of serving him, tending him, offering up her little being on the altar of her love. She had thought as a child, but she had felt, alas! as a woman. And now those words of Miss Gale's had revealed her to herself. She saw what this blind devotion unconsciously had been, what it was that, without knowing, she had given him, and giving, now had lost.

"He had been engaged to her many years." She could not help a little pang of bitterness entering her mind, which, nevertheless, poor child, she drove jealously away as soon as it appeared, as she thought of that afternoon by the riverside, of the kind words he had spoken, the kisses he had pressed upon her face, the clasp which in its tenderness had seemed to say that the pain of parting had not been all her own. So then it had been all a dream, very beautiful, very real while it lasted—but a dream, nothing more. That measureless love of hers had been to him no home in which he might dwell at ease; only as a little wayside resting-place, pleasant, perhaps, for him to turn aside and refresh himself at, but no more than that. It never had been more; it never could be more. He had seen through the half-open door the ruddy gleam of the fire upon the hearth, and coming in had sat down and warmed himself beside it. Then he had gone again on his way towards that far-off home where sat one waiting for him. Poor Janet! She held the thought of him still warm and close within her heart. She could not help that, but to hold his hand again in hers save for a brief space, a passing greeting, was not hers to know. She flung it wildly, helplessly, from her starved, trembling fingers, as she felt herself alone—her life dark and empty for all time to come, nothing now which she cared to rise up and meet.

My poor Janet! If I could but press the little tired form in my arms, and whisper that the world was not all unkind! But here, as everywhere, the great unbridged gulf that separates all human spirits one from the other, gapes between us. We must leave her to herself to struggle as best she may out of that deepest of all solitudes, the solitude of a first great grief. It will do no good to watch the poor child shuddering over her yet untasted misery. She has to drink it. We all have, sooner or later, in our lives. Afterwards we find that the bitter draught has infused a stronger life into our souls. The heart that has been stretched and strained well-nigh to bursting, grows larger by-and-bye. The good God empties it of its suffering, and then we find that He has all the time only been expanding it, that so when He shall fill it with joy it may hold the more, and hold it the more securely.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

LUNCH IN THE WOODS.

IT was about a fortnight after Miss Gale's visit, that Alison Birney called one morning to invite Janet to join a little party that she had planned for the next day. They were to have lunch in the wood, and then go on the river in a boat, which Mr. Clyde, who was to be of their number, had brought down with him from Bedesby. Besides him, there would be two cousins of her own who were staying at the rectory, and Mr. Meade, the new curate, who, as the kind-hearted Alison thought, seemed rather a stranger yet among the Marton people, and would be the better for a little friendly attention.

Janet promised to go; she could not resist

Alison's gentle persistence. Besides, secretly, she was glad of the prospect of having a row upon the river. Mr. Maudsley had taken her once, and shown her how to handle an oar; and she wanted to feel again the soft, gliding motion of the boat, and to hear the cool plash of the oars in the water, and watch the sunlight glancing from the spray, and try to fancy it all over once again.

When Alison rose to go, she hesitated a moment, then smoothed down Janet's brown hair with a soft, caressing gesture, and kissed her on the forehead. She did not often do this, but somehow she fancied Janet had seemed out of spirits lately. There was something wrong with her, though what she could not tell. She felt sorry for her, shut up in that lonely old house, and went away thinking she would see more of her in future, and try to brighten up her life a little.

When the next day came, Janet, if she could, would willingly have stayed at home. She did not care much just now about going, and there would be all these strangers there too. However, she had made her promise to Alison, so, of course, she could not break it. And yet when she was fairly started, and had got out of the mossy lane into the green sunlit wood, she felt herself springing up again like grass that has been trodden on. The fresh air did her good, like a medicine. It braced her up to something that was almost enjoyment of the spring beauty around her. The young nature was elastic, and though it had bent beneath the blow that had struck her girlish hopes to the ground, it would not so easily be broken.

Most men, and most women too, have, like Janet, to go through a first love, which yet is but seldom their last. For a love so to compass the whole life—to penetrate and control every power that, if it be wrenched up by the roots, hope shall be torn up with it, so that henceforth life is a thing that may be patiently borne, cheerfully made the best of, perhaps, but never again enjoyed, no fresh shoots springing up from the old stock—for all this to be, love must be very deep and strong, not on one side only, but on both; and in first love this is comparatively seldom the case. It plays its part in our life; it reveals us to ourselves, shows to us the heights and depths of our nature, makes us conscious of what we are capable; but it rarely exhausts the whole capacity of loving, of enjoying, or of suffering. In woman it is often rather a hero-worship than a love. As mountains draw the lightning out of the sky, so does the object of this early devotion draw to itself all that electric vapour of emotion, ideality, and passion, which is slumbering in the heaven of a young girl's soul.

And such, though she knew it not, had been Janet's love for Mr. Maudsley. He was to her the type of all that existed unconsciously in her imagination. He was great enough for her to fall down before; wise enough for her to feel her little being lost in his unbounded attainments; good and gentle enough for her to bask in the sunshine of his presence. Above all, he had somehow made her feel that her society was pleasant to him. Her life was no longer poor, for she could give him that which even he could value. And to give, only to give, is always the strongest impulse of a young girl's heart. It is not till afterwards she learns to think more of also receiving love.

Yet Janet's love, though for the time it had filled her whole being, was not one to grow with her growth; it lacked the one element of endurance, the certainty of its being returned. It folded her round completely now; but by-and-bye, as her nature expanded, it would become all too strait; it would fall away as the sheath falls from the leaf when the calyx is torn open that the full glory of the flower may be put forth. And now that the first bitterness was past, and she knew assuredly that her love was hers alone, she was beginning to feel more quiet than ever during that long season of suspense. But it was the quietness of a stagnant pool. Her mind was for the time in a sort of stupor: she was moved this way and that, by people and things around her, but all force of her own seemed for the time to have been exhausted by the first violence of her grief.

The church clock was striking twelve just as she got through the wood into the village. She hastened on to the Rectory, and found them all just ready to start. The Canon was going to lunch with them, though he had declined the expedition on the river; and Alison had already sent forward some rugs and the hamper of provisions to the place where they were to halt.

Before they set off, she introduced Janet to the two cousins, Mr. Garsides, a young barrister just returned from his first circuit, still and grave as a mountain-tarn, though with a dash of humour gleaming far down in his eye; and Cicely, his sister, a slight, merry girl, bright and sparkling as a moorland rill—the very one to give life and animation to a picnic party. There was the young curate, too, whom Janet knew already, a sensitive, shy young man; and lastly, Mr. Clyde, whom she had seen yesterday for the first time at church, where more than once, looking up, she had met the gaze of his dark eyes resting on her face.

They all went on in a group across the village, and through the lodge gates; then gradually they fell into smaller knots. Mr. Clyde gave Janet his arm, and led her on a little in advance of the rest. They hardly spoke as they went along.

Janet had nothing to say; or if she had, she did not care to say it; and her companion was almost as quiet as herself. The others came laughing and talking behind them. The merry little cousin had possessed herself of the Canon, and was dancing gaily along like a tiny pleasure-sloop alongside a seventy-four-gun ship. The barrister was lingering by the side of Alison, who, in her quiet, kind way, was trying to make the shy young curate feel himself at ease.

No one who knew Alison Birney ever thought of calling her amiable or self-forgetting. These fair qualities, which in most women are but as the embroidery of character, seemed in her to form its very essence and texture. There was about her that aroma of sweet womanly graciousness, tempered with a gentle reticence and repose, which emanates only from a pure and lofty life. No wonder that wherever she went happiness seemed to spring up beneath her steps, as it did now, judging from the bright faces of her companions, and the gay voices that were ringing around her.

At last they reached the place where they were to lunch. Mr. Clyde still kept Janet's arm within his own, and moved a little apart, while the others merrily unpacked and set out the provisions. When all was arranged, he chose a place for her, a grassy knoll, where she could lean back against the smooth trunk of a great beech-tree. Then he spread a rug for her to sit upon, provided her with all she wanted, and stretching himself at her feet, so as partly to separate her from the rest, began to talk to her in a steady under-tone, to which Janet could not choose but listen. There was a sort of still strength in his ways, which made her feel like a little child before him.

He was telling her of the vineyards and olive-yards of Spain, whence he had just returned from a tour, of its stately palaces and churches, of the swarthy beauty of its peasant girls, and the dusty splendour of its mouldering Alhambra.

And Janet, sitting there in the sun-flecked shade, heard him as in a dream, his voice sounding between herself and the merry chatter of the rest of the party. Now and then Alison looked across, satisfied to see that she seemed interested at last; but she did not interrupt their conversation. So Janet sat all the time, leaning against her beech-tree, just listening, seldom speaking herself, and Mr. Clyde's presence, like a wall, shutting her in with him.

When luncheon was over, the Canon rose and went off home by himself. He came round first though to Janet, and took both her hands in his as he said good-bye.

"You don't come up to the rectory so often as you used, Janet. Are you growing tired of us, eh?"

Janet looked up with a protesting smile.

"And you are getting paler than you used to be. It won't do at all. Alison must look after you a little."

And then he went away, and Mr. Clyde took possession of her again, until Alison proposed that they should go down to the boat. It was some little distance to it, across the wood. They had to push through a long winding-path, tangled over with brushwood, briers, and creepers. This brought them out by-and-bye upon a strip of grassy land that ran along between the wood and the river. There was a cave here where the boat was moored, but no proper landing-place; and Alison and her cousin, when they reached the brink, looked doubtfully, as well they might, at the steep bank down which they would have to scramble.

But Mr. Clyde was already in the boat and helping Alison down. She half slipped on the smooth, wiry grass, and the boat rocked suspiciously as he made a hasty movement to assist her, and drew her safe in. Janet looked alarmed.

"You need not be afraid," he said, reaching out his hand as if to bid her follow.

She came to the edge of the bank, and then, without another word, he lifted her down as if she had been a child. When she was fairly in, he turned round to find her a seat, leaving the others to manage for themselves.

"Can you steer?" he asked.

Janet nodded an answer, and he led her to the further end of the boat, putting the strings into her hands; and then, placing Alison before her, he took an oar, laid the other one for the barrister behind him, and sat down in front of them. In a few moments they had pulled out into the middle of the river, and were going steadily down the stream.

Alison was a little tired and glad to be still for awhile, and Janet shut her eyes, and leaning back abandoned herself to the dreamy delicious sensation produced by the gliding motion of the boat. It was like being gently rocked to sleep, and the measured plash of the oars in the water sounded like a lullaby in her listening ears. She wished it were possible to have remembered being lulled to sleep upon her mother's breast. She thought it must have felt just like this, only that then there would be no dull heartache to soothe away. She heard the merry low laugh of Cicely among her companions at the other end of the boat, but it was too far off to interfere with the quiet; and neither Mr. Clyde nor Alison seemed disposed to talk, except that now and then Alison made some chance remark, to which Mr. Clyde responded, and then again both were silent.

At last they reached the point where they were to turn. There was an awkward bar in the river which could only be passed when the water was high. The two oarsmen began to paddle the boat round, Janet had to attend to her steering now, and was rousing herself back to waking life, when suddenly the barrister made a false stroke. He tilted backward on his seat, and in the effort to recover himself was dragged by his oar half over the side of the slender boat, which, overbalanced by his weight, gave a terrible lurch. Alison turned pale, and Cicely screamed out and started towards her brother.

"Sit still, all of you," shouted Mr. Clyde, who saw that the addition of Cicely's weight would be almost certain to capsize the boat, and send them all into the water together. He reached round, grasped the arm of the unlucky barrister, and with a single effort dragged him back into his place. But as he turned again, Janet noticed a sharp wince of pain cross his face. He took the oar into his left hand, and made two or three uneven strokes. Alison's quick eye saw that there was something wrong.

"You have hurt yourself," she exclaimed.

"It is nothing," he replied; "I have strained my wrist, I believe. But it has happened unfortunately. I shall not be able to pull back very well with this left hand. Mr. Meade, can you take an oar?"

The curate blushed like a girl as he confessed his inability.

"Then I must do my best," he replied, turning round again and addressing himself to his task, but he made the attempt with such evident difficulty that Alison seemed quite pained, and Janet after hesitating awhile, ventured at last to proffer her services.

Mr. Clyde looked a little dubious.

"Are you sure you can row?" said he, resting on his oar. "It is hard work."

"I know what it is. I have rowed before," she answered; and satisfied by her assurance, he rose, and handing her cautiously to his seat with his left hand, sat down himself in her place at the helm.

Janet took the oar and began to row, almost as easily as if she had been accustomed to the exercise. It was pleasant to her. She enjoyed the rhythmic motion, the exhilaration of cleaving her way along through the gleaming tide, the cool play of the breeze, which at every bend in the river fanned her flushing face. They went gliding on between the high grassy banks, with their fringe of grey willows above, and tall flags and reeds beneath, past little argosies of water-lilies floating among their dark green leaves, by sheltered nooks so thickly strewn with hyacinths and forget-me-nots, that you might suppose a patch of blue sky had dropped down here and there to earth. And all the time Janet felt upon her that dark, watchful eye, which already, she knew not how, was beginning to exert a sort of fascination over her. Again and again something drew her to glance up, and always she found it fixed upon herself. She could not understand it; she did not feel uneasy or annoyed, but it was as if he were taking all her own power of will away from her. It was a relief when, by-and-bye, Alison began to talk, and he turned aside and steered the boat towards a cluster of water-lilies which she was admiring.

The young barrister stayed his oar, and reaching carefully over, managed to bring up three or four of the stately blossoms.

"Do you know," said Janet, as he laid his prize at his cousin's feet, "I always fancy these water-lilies are just like Alison. There is such a snowy dignity about them, and they are so pure and fair, and not common flowers at all."

Alison laughed.

"I must try to deserve such a compliment," she said, as she laid away her lilies for safety under a ledge in the boat. "But Janet, are you not getting tired with that hard work?"

"Oh no, not at all," she answered, eagerly. "I like it; and it is quite easy now that I have got used to it."

And then Cicely began to chatter across to them from the other end of the boat; and the stream of talk flowed gaily on, until at length they arrived at the landing-place again. They managed to scramble safely ashore, fastened the boat to its moorings, and then struck across to the road that ran through the centre of the wood.

Here they were to part. Alison and her cousins were going home to dinner, the young curate to his lodgings, and Janet, after bidding them good-bye, turned to shake hands also with Mr. Clyde.

"Ah! your strained wrist," she exclaimed. "I had forgotten it. I must just say good-bye, then."

"If you will allow me, I will walk through the wood with you," he said. "I must see Mr. Brande. Is he at home?"

"Oh, yes," said Janet; "he is very seldom away. But I did not know you knew him."

"I am glad you are not going by yourself," said Alison, who had been trying in vain to induce Janet to return with them to the rectory. "It was so careless in me not to make you quite understand that we expected you to dinner as well." And then with another farewell pressure of her hand they separated, and Janet turned homewards, accompanied by Mr. Clyde. They walked on for some little time silently, down the long vista of overarching trees. At last Janet looked up timidly.

"Does your wrist pain you?" she inquired.

"No," he answered abruptly, as if half annoyed by her question. And then, after a moment's pause, he asked her suddenly if she had been in London during the spring.

Janet started; it was as if he had been reading her thoughts, which just then were wandering away to where the "Madeline" hung upon the walls of the Academy. She had been wishing it were possible for her to steal in unseen, and take one long look at the pictured form. It was all she cared for, but she should like to see it once, to hear the praises of the people, to share the artist's fame although herself unknown, and to bring back to her memory that moment in the Tudor chamber, when the idea had first flashed across his mind. She was learning already to think quietly sometimes of those hours that to her had seemed to be as the beginning of life, to think of them as of a time with which the present had no connexion. The past few weeks had put them at an immeasurable distance from her. Her very hopelessness had brought her rest.

Mr. Clyde's sudden question broke in upon her musings. She answered "No," in some confusion.

"I thought you might have felt some curiosity to see Maudsley's 'Madeline.' It is an excellent likeness, but you are paler now than you were then."

Janet was not pale now. He was looking

down at her, and she turned her face towards him all crimsoned with the sudden excitement. He went on without seeming to notice her.

"You would like to see it, would you not? You ought, you know, since you inspired the artist with his idea. He told me himself that he was indebted to you for the success of his picture."

Janet tried to force herself to quietness.

"I am afraid I shall not," she said. "We never go from home, and London is so far away."

He knew Mr. Maudsley, then! They had been talking about her. What did he say? What was he doing? She longed to know, but did not dare to ask.

"I shall hope to show it you before very long," said Mr. Clyde. "The picture is mine, but at present, of course, it must remain where it is. I could not resist the temptation to possess myself of it, nor to come down here and see the original. Maudsley told me where you were to be found, and gave me a letter of introduction to Mr. Brande. It is rather odd that my mother should chance to be here just at the time," he added, after a pause; and then he turned from the subject, and began to talk about indifferent things, till they arrived at the gate which opened out of the lane into the garden of the Priory House.

Miss Mildred was there, tying up her pinks. So was Mr. Brande, who was walking up and down with his hands behind him, beneath the high beech hedge that enclosed the garden.

Janet introduced her companion. She dared not trust herself to say, "a friend of Mr. Maudsley's." But Mr. Clyde supplied her omission, and presented the artist's letter. There was a stately courtesy about Mr. Brande, absent as he was, which suited well with his tall spare figure and noble countenance. He received his guest with a quiet cordiality, and conducted him to the house, followed by Janet and her aunt.

Mr. Clyde, however, did not stay very long. He had obtained his introduction to the family at the Priory House, and that was sufficient for the present. He sat for a few moments only, conversing with Mr. Brande, and then took his leave, promising to repeat his visit on the following day and bring with him his mother, who he was sure would be glad to make the acquaintance of Miss Brande.

CHAPTER XIX.

I WILL.

HE did come the next day, and Mrs. Clyde with him. She was a tall, severe-looking woman, in a limp black dress. Dark-complexioned, like her son, but without that glow of conscious ease and strength that redeemed his countenance from the harshness which characterized her own. She was soon deep in conversation with Miss Mildred, talking in a dull rasping voice that grated unpleasantly on Janet's ears, as she sat a little apart in her favourite seat just within the Oriel window. The two elder ladies presently discovered that they had both been to the same school in Bedesby, and had, moreover, one or two mutual acquaintances in the city. Miss Mildred found, too, that her visitor held views exactly coinciding with her own on her pet subject, the management of charity schools, and the proportion which ought to be observed between the amount of needlework, reading, and writing to be taught in them. Both agreed also in lamenting the deterioration of female servants in the present day, and the difficulty of obtaining now any that were good for anything.

"Such notions, too, as they have in their heads!" said Miss Mildred. "Why, even our maid Bessie actually has her letters addressed 'Miss Jones,' and only the other day I caught her in Janet's room leaning on her broom and reading the 'Lady of the Lake,' instead of getting on with her work."

Mrs. Clyde shook her head and expressed her opinion that, if things went on much further, we should by-and-bye be unable to obtain servants of any kind. Their heads were being filled so full of such nonsense as history, geography, and grammar, which were being taught to the girls in these new Government schools, that she said she expected they would soon be quite above such a menial occupation as domestic service.

Altogether, though, like little Miss Gale, Miss Mildred had not been prepossessed in favour of her visitor at first, yet she parted from her quite delighted to have met with a person who on these important points could sympathize so entirely with herself.

And all the time Mr. Clyde had been keeping Janet by his side, talking to her in a low vibrating voice, that seemed almost to touch her; it wound about her so, making her feel that she must listen to him, whether she cared or no for what he was saying to her, and when he went away, leaving her with that strange sense of being released from something that was holding her, which she had felt the day before when he gave over watching her, and began to talk to Alison in the boat.

He came almost every day after this, once or twice with his mother, but generally alone, offering no excuse for his frequent visits, never staying very long at a time, but always before he went devoting himself for a time exclusively to Janet, drawing her irresistibly within the circle of his influence, as a leaf is swept within the current of an eddy in a stream. And there was little now in her to oppose to the power he was thus exerting over her. All that once had given strength and energy to her nature, bracing it to vigour and activity, had been withdrawn. She was feeling limp and spiritless throughout, and swayed helplessly hither and thither just as any passing breeze might move her.

By-and-bye, when her drooping forces should have recovered their tone, and the young life within her have again asserted its supremacy, it would be different; but just now, before this new influence, she bent like a reed before the wind.

Hannah, from her kitchen, marked what was going on, and shook her head. Somehow she mistrusted that dark-faced stranger. There was a dangerous light in those dusky eyes that boded no good, she feared, to her young mistress.

"He don't come here for nothing," she thought to herself, as she sat one morning outside the door shelling peas, and saw over the hedge Mr. Clyde going down to the garden-gate, and Janet walking slowly, with bowed head, beside him. "He's after Miss Janet, as sure as peas is green, an' he'll bring her trouble too, the dear, nobbut he gets a hold of her, for all he's so well-spoken an' has such a grand like way wi' him. It's ill trusting men with faces like yon o' his. You might as well wed a linnet to a hawk, as trust a young lady like Miss Janet, bless her, with one o' them. He'll pleasure with her a bit maybe, an' then break her heart, an' look as smooth after it all as yon pool down at Dead Man's Dyke, where, they say, there was the bones of a murdered man found at the bottom one summer's day."

But Hannah might shake her head. Mr. Clyde came all the same, and whether the old servant was right in her bodings or not, Miss Mildred, for her part, thought he was one of the most agreeable young men she had met with for a long time. So courteous and attentive, without seeming fussy or forward in the least, and always listened too with such deference to any remarks she might make, so different from some she could mention. And Miss Mildred pursed her lips a little, drew up her head and lamented, as she often did, the degeneracy of the young people of the present day.

Janet was sitting up in her own room one warm still afternoon, stitching away at a rent in her dress, which she was hoping to darn up so neatly that her aunt would not discover it had been torn, or reprove her for the carelessness which had caused the accident. This heedlessness about her clothes was an old fault of Janet's, one which she had not outgrown, any more than Miss Mildred had outgrown her habit of scolding the girl, as though she had been still a child, when such accidents occurred.

She was working busily away when she heard through the open window the sound of steps coming up the walk from the gate. She peeped out cautiously from behind the curtain, and saw the figures of the two Misses Curlew. They were coming to call upon her aunt, and they always stayed such a time, too. She would be sure to be called down to sit with them, and then her aunt would find out about her frock, and very likely say something to her about it before them.

All this flashed through her mind in an instant, and then she snatched up her hat, which was lying on a chair, ran swiftly downstairs, out at the garden-door, and by the time that a peal of the bell announced the arrival of visitors, she was half-way down the beech-tree walk, on her way to her little retreat by the river-side, where she hoped to remain undiscovered until the company had departed.

She went quite close to the waterside, and sitting on a rocky ledge, gathered her dress closely around her, and bent down over the dark gleaming river that lay like a polished mirror at her feet. She could see reflected in it the great ash trees that stretched their branches overhead, leaving hardly a single space in the thick leafage through which a gleam of sunshine could force its way. And there in the green shadow, framed round by the arching foliage, she saw her own figure, the eyes meeting and answering her steadfast gaze, as if some one else like and yet unlike herself, were holding communion with her.

For long she sat thus, her arms resting on the twisted root of a tree that had writhed itself down towards the water. A sort of fascination held her gazing on the mirrored countenance; a dim feeling of companionship breathed towards her from that pictured form, a sense of pitying sympathy soothing her, she hardly knew why. Presently she roused herself with an impatient gesture, and pushed back from her forehead the heavy masses of russet hair, which in this shadowy covert had gathered a deeper tone. And as she did so, a weary, longing look came eddying up into her eyes, and flowed quietly, slowly, over her face.

She remembered that last year she had sat thus one day with Mr. Maudsley, on this same rocky ledge, reading over to him Schiller's " Song of the Bell," trying to catch from him, as he repeated the lines, the rhythm and ring of the German words; and then how he had laid the book out of her hand, and twining one of the long brown tresses round and round his finger, had told out to her the grand meaning that underlay the poet's words. She remembered how pleasant it had been listening to him, and then how, stealing a wistful glance at him as he sat there, the happy glow had died away at sight of his far-off face; how she knew that his thoughts were not with her, the little girl by his side, that they had slipped away from her feeble companionship, and were moving on with steady majestic march in a region where she could no longer follow him.

She was startled by hearing footsteps on the bank above her head. How provoking! she could not be quiet even here. She started to her feet, and immediately a voice, which she recognised as that of Mr. Clyde, called to her.

"Stay where you are, I am coming to you."

The next moment he had leaped down, and was standing by her side.

"You have got a quiet hiding-place here," he said. "I should not have found you out, if Rollo had not betrayed your whereabouts. What were you doing? You are quite in a flutter; your hand is trembling in mine like a frightened bird."

He had taken her hand in his, and was holding it all the time, looking down straight into her face with that steady, burning gaze, that always seemed to Janet to draw all her strength away. She did not answer; she was trembling before him as the leaves in a wood tremble before the wind. Neither did he speak again for awhile, and Janet felt the silence falling strangely around her. At last he broke it. He was holding her still with that controlling gaze.

"You know what it is I want."

His voice was a little lower, a little deeper and nearer to her than usual. That was all; but there was no mistaking what he meant. Janet understood him well, although she neither spoke nor moved, only trembled more visibly, and flushed a deeper colour.

She was feeling as if her whole past life had drifted from her, and left behind it nothing but this strong, dark presence in which she was standing. If he chose to take her, she was his. All power to resist his will had passed away beneath that long unwavering look. He had conquered, and he knew it.

"It is to be, then, Janet," he said. "Speak; for I am going back to your father now, to tell him you have promised. Will you have me?"

And then Janet answered, in a faint, uncertain voice, which yet to her seemed to ring through all the listening air. One little word; but when it was spoken, she had cut the last cable which held her safely in the quiet haven of home. Her little craft was floating out—whither?—with that dark steersman at the helm.

He said nothing to her after that, only laid his two hands heavily upon her shoulders, and stooping down his bearded face, he kissed her on the brow.

She was his now. Scarcely a month ago he had fallen in love with the pictured face on the walls of the Academy; and now the iron will which had never failed him yet had won for him the original.

The next moment he was gone, and Janet was standing by herself, wondering at what had come to pass. She could have thought it all a dream, but that she felt still the touch of his lips upon her forehead. It meant that before many months were past she was to be this Brian Clyde's wife.

His wife—his wife! She looked around: there was the sheltered nook beneath the ash, the river glancing by, the waves of green wheat on the other side of the bank, that seemed to be still rising and falling before the wind. There was the dappled sky bending over all. Everything just as it had been ten minutes before; and yet this strange change had fallen into her life.

She felt as if she were just dipping her foot into some broad, dark-flowing stream, and knew not whether she should be able to ford it safely, or be borne resistlessly along the torrent. But she could not gather her thoughts together sufficiently to realize what had happened. She sat down again, and gazed vacantly on the unceasing flow of the current that was gliding past. It seemed to her, in its living motion, like a companion ever saying something in a language which she could not comprehend. Yet it soothed her with its murmuring voice, and lulled her into a mood, that, if not forgetfulness, was at least indifference. It was as if her whole life were flowing on with the steady tide—as if nothing could ever have power again to lash it into storm. There was no longer anything that she should care to lose, nothing that she should rejoice to have. Whatever came to her now was all as one, and being Brian Clyde's wife would be only as a ripple on the stream.

CHAPTER XX.

PREPARATION.

THIS was in June, and in August they were to be married. That had been arranged as soon as the engagement was made. Miss Mildred could have wished it to have been a little later. There would be hardly time, she was afraid, to prepare a fitting trousseau. Besides, now that Janet was really on the eve of such an important event—not merely passing through the gate of marriage out of girlhood into womanhood, but leaving her own land as well as her father's house—the heart of the staid old aunt folded more closely than before around her motherless niece. Hitherto she had regarded her chiefly as something that required to be lectured and scolded up to her own standard of female perfection—a troublesome charge, who needed looking after on every side, lest she should break away from the straight path of propriety in which she expected her to walk. But now she looked at her with softened eyes. Already the dignity of the future bride was gathering round the girl. Miss Mildred ceased to scold, and began to counsel. She felt that the topstone was being put upon the edifice which she had laboured so assiduously to erect; and her great anxiety now was, to furnish her with such store of maxims as should serve for direction when she herself could be no longer at hand to advise.

Mr. Brande, too, would fain have kept his daughter by his side. True, he had never made of her either a pet or a companion; yet, now that she was about to be taken from him, perhaps never to return, he discovered how closely she was bound up with his life. She was young, almost too young, he thought, to be a wife; yet it was, perhaps, better, on the whole, that he should see her safely settled now, than have to leave her at his death to battle through the world alone. Her husband would be strong enough to shield her from the ills of life. He had good connexions, good prospects, and had certainly, Mr. Brande considered, acted in the whole affair as honourably as a man could. He had obtained his consent before saying anything to her; and though Janet would have her mother's fortune when she came of age, yet he had been willing that the greater portion of it should be settled on herself.

Of his past life Mr. Brande knew little. He was not a man skilled in discerning character. Mr. Clyde was quiet and gentlemanly in his bearing, irreproachable in all his ways—all, at least, that came under the eyes of Mr. Brande, who was a man of a singularly guileless and unsuspicious nature; and for the rest, why, the sins of men are not, like those of women, blazoned on their foreheads; and in his intercourse at the Priory House, Mr. Clyde had never by any chance word or hint revealed anything in his previous history from which its simple-minded inhabitants might need to shrink.

So it was settled that the marriage was to be at the end of August, which would leave time sufficient for the wedding-tour, and allow Janet afterwards to pay a farewell visit for a day or two at her old home, before proceeding with her husband to the port whence they were to embark for India.

Miss Mildred set busily to work. A bridal outfit, and for India, too, was no ordinary undertaking; and although Mrs. Clyde suggested that many things would be better purchased ready-made, and even offered her own assistance in selecting them from the Bedesby warehouses, yet enough remained in the way of preparations to render the intervening months a period of anxious and unremitting occupation.

But to Miss Mildred the affair was altogether one of absorbing interest. She scrutinized the texture and quality of the rich silks brought out for her approval by the Bedesby shopmen, held them carefully to the light and tested the softness and thickness of the fabric with that sage experienced air which ladies on these occasions are accustomed to assume. She turned over pile after pile of filmy lace and transparent cambric, chose the finest and most delicate muslins and embroidery, and gathered together, regardless of expense, all those multitudinous accessories of the toilette, without which no modern bride is considered to be properly prepared for the dignity she is about to assume.

More than once she sorted over the whole contents of the great linen press on the landing, selecting therefrom the finest damask drapery that it contained. Dozens and dozens of every article that was needed for household use. For it was fifty years since a bride had gone from the Priory House, and there was store in that great chest to serve for generations yet to come. She held long consultations, too, with Mrs. Clyde, whose house at Bedesby being longer on hand than was at first expected, remained at Marton till the beginning of July, and who, stern-featured as she was, unbent to take into consideration the various details of the trousseau, and looked on with a certain grim satisfaction at the rapidly advancing preparations.

For Mrs. Clyde was at last nearing the accomplishment of the long-cherished wish of her heart. She was about to see her son married, and to just such a girl as she should have chosen for him herself. For no one could be quieter, Mrs. Clyde thought, or less given apparently to the pomps and vanities of the world of fashion, than this Miss Brande, whom her son had chosen, and who had been so carefully trained by such an exemplary person as Miss Mildred Brande.

Brian Clyde had been a stubborn, self-willed boy, almost ungovernable in his temper, and resenting bitterly during his youth the iron hand of authority laid upon him by his mother. For Mrs. Clyde had never tried the force of love. A stern restraint was the only means that presented itself to her of holding back her son from the evil courses which had hurried his father to the grave.

But as Brian grew older, and his nature hardened into manhood, his will had gained the mastery over hers. Coolly and quietly he set her at defiance, and stung the mother's heart, which lay deep hidden beneath its wrappings of harshness and severity, by hardly caring to hide from her those stains in his life which, indeed, by young men of the world are often not considered a reproach. Her only hope had been, that when he married, his wife would win him from his doubtful ways. He would settle down, she thought, when he had a home of his own, and, under proper influence there, become all that she could wish. But until he could maintain a wife it was useless to think of his marrying one, and though his tastes were expensive and severely taxed her means, he had never yet tied himself down to the restraints of a profession.

At last this Indian appointment had turned up, and her hopes rose high, for he had said, as he sat over his coffee by the drawing-room fire on one of those rare evenings, which, when at Bedesby, he had spent at home, that he was thinking of looking out for a handsome girl to take over with him, for life would be so awfully slow in India. "And one with a 'tocher,' too," he added, "for my father has limited me to a wife that can keep herself. It is a pity when people can't be reasonable in their pleasures. They may enjoy life surely if they have any sense, without either killing themselves or robbing those who come after them."

Mrs. Clyde said nothing in return. She had learned, poor woman, to keep silence before her son, and only waited in anxious suspense to see whom he would choose to be his wife. If only it were not some giddy extravagant girl, who would be more likely to get wrong herself than to lead him right.

But with Janet Brande she was even more than satisfied. Such a quiet, docile girl, so steady and well conducted. Of a good family, too, and if her fortune was not large, still not quite penniless. Very attractive also; and though beauty in itself was no recommendation to Mrs. Clyde, indeed rather the reverse, she knew well that therein would lie the source of Janet's influence with her son.

No wonder, then, if inwardly she exulted that his choice had fallen on one so suited in every respect to be his wife. Whether the young girl herself had been equally fortunate was a question with which Mrs. Clyde had no concern. Woman was intended to minister to man, and if now and then a victim was sacrificed in the service, why others had suffered before, and the risk was common to all. Janet, like the rest, must take her chance, and if her innocence and beauty availed for the reformation of her husband, the benefit would be her own. At all events Mrs. Clyde did not see that it was her place to deter the girl from the step she was taking, or to frustrate her own long-cherished plans by revealing to her before marriage what it was to be hoped she would never discover after.

The person who seemed to be least interested in all that was going on was Janet herself. She made her choice, when it was necessary to do so, among the various articles of millinery, lace, and jewellery, silks and muslins, that were submitted to her for selection. She stood passively while bonnets, dresses, and mantles were being tried on and passed in review before the critical eye of her aunt. She sat unweariedly stitching away at the multitudinous articles of feminine attire which Miss Mildred prepared and put into her hands to make. Her future life, when she thought of it at all, seemed bounded by a definite horizon—her wedding-day. Beyond that, all was blank. She hardly realized that anything would succeed the time when these preparations should be completed, and the irrevocable words pronounced which should make her the wife of Brian Clyde.

Yet each day was narrowing the space that separated her from it, each day retreat, even if she wished it, was becoming more and more impossible, and each day while he remained at Marton, came Mr. Clyde to the Priory House, subduing her by that all-constraining presence, or making her feel as if her will was lost in his beneath that long controlling gaze which at rare intervals he bent upon her.

At rare intervals. Mr. Clyde did not burden her with love, for which he saw that she had no return. The girl's heart lay like an open page before him. It was not the first he had studied. He read there in characters not to be mistaken—the story of a previous love. He saw that it was only the reaction caused by some broken or disappointed faith that had drained her for the time of all energy and will, and led her to yield without resistance to the overmastering force which his stronger nature had put upon her own. By-

and-bye, he had no doubt, strength would return —the young life within her begin to assert itself again. Women got over these things; he had mangled some hearts himself, and seen them cured; but in the meantime she would have become his own, beyond all power of release. She would struggle, perhaps, in her prison. It would be all in vain; she would only bruise herself against the bars.

And yet he would rather that she loved him, too. There was something in the girl that impelled him irresistibly to long to reach down to the soul which looked out so meekly and unhopefully from those dark, liquid eyes of hers. Yes, he would bind her, and firmly, too; he must do that, but her fetters should be soft.

There are few men so case-hardened by a course of selfish sin as to be wholly proof against the good influences which from time to time stream in upon them from without. Brian Clyde was not. The fires of passion had burnt fiercely and long within his breast; but there was one green spot remaining still, and when Janet's face had first looked down upon him from the canvas, it was its undimmed purity, as well as its rare unconscious grace, that had won him to desire, not her beauty only, but her love, to be for him a quiet resting-place when the toil and anxiety of his India life should have begun. There were dim feelings within him which hitherto he had found none to share, in those hours when every human being longs to lay some part of the weight of his own nature on the heart of another. There was strength in that young girl's innocence. He could lean upon it without fear. There was a strange fascination in her guileless loveliness, and so with that soiled hand of his he had reached forth and drawn her to himself.

Who are we, that we should harshly judge another because the outer garment of his life may be stained more blackly than our own? This man had received at his birth, as a mingled inheritance, his father's stormy passions, his mother's stubborn will, both grafted on a stock so replete with vital force, that only the sternest self-restraint could have repressed their growth. Perhaps he had striven, and been overcome; perhaps he had yielded without resistance.

One thing is certain—the victory had not been his.

Let those who have been less strongly tried thank God with trembling, not with pride, that life has been made an easier task to them.

⁂

CHAPTER XXI.

DOUBTS.

AUGUST had come, with its yellow corn-fields and its purple moors—its sultry days and dewy nights. The leaves in the garden of the Priory House began to rustle crisply in the breeze, and the palm-like fronds of the great horse-chestnut by the gate to look a little bronzed amid the fresher foliage of the limes and beeches by its side. The thirty-first was to be the wedding-day, and Miss Mildred was straining every nerve that the preparations might be completed, as far as possible, at least a week beforehand, so as to afford a little quiet time before the excitement of the great event began.

Alison Birney was to have been the chief bridesmaid; but for the last month she had been in the south, watching by the sick-bed of an invalid aunt, who required her constant care. She was sorry to disappoint Janet, and had even proposed to make the journey from Torquay the previous day, and return as soon as the ceremony should be over. This, however, Miss Mildred would by no means suffer her to do; and as Janet had no other intimate friends of her own, it was arranged that Alison's place should be supplied by two young ladies, nieces of Mrs. Clyde's, who were then on a visit to their aunt.

But a more serious obstacle than this intervened, which for a time threatened even to postpone the marriage altogether. This was the illness of Mr. Brande himself, who for a day or two seemed to be almost at the point of death. He had driven over to Bedesby one morning with his sister in the little pony-carriage through a heavy rain, and sitting all day in his damp clothes in the great lecture-hall, where a meeting of the Archæological Society was being held, had received a chill, which ended in a dangerous attack of rheumatic gout. Happily, however, the violence of the disorder abated under the skilful treatment of the physician from Bedesby, who had been summoned to attend him, so that all fears for his safety were removed; though a week only before the time fixed for the wedding he still remained in a somewhat critical condition.

Mr. Clyde usually rode over once a week, rarely oftener, to the Priory House. He watched warily each passing mood of feeling on the part of his intended bride, and wisely judged that his safest policy at present would be to keep aloof as much as practicable, until she should be more securely his own. The time was nearing rapidly now, yet still there was the possibility that the prize might escape from his hands; and lately he fancied he had perceived slight symptoms of a change in her manner. There was more independence, more fitfulness, and less apathy. The last time he had been was the very day that Mr. Brande had taken his unfortunate journey to Bedesby; Janet was alone, and while he stayed she had seemed impatient instead of subdued; had talked more, moved restlessly about, and evidently tried to avoid being near him. He saw that she was agitated and uneasy in his presence. Perhaps she was waking up to all that was about to happen, and now that the scales of indifference were falling from her eyes, and her marriage was close at hand, she might shrink from abandoning herself completely to his control. He resolved not to repeat his visit sooner than was absolutely necessary; and it was therefore not until a day or two after Mr. Brande had been pronounced in a fair way of recovery that he appeared again at the Priory House.

He was accompanied by his mother. Miss Mildred had apprised them of her brother's illness; and Mrs. Clyde came prepared with a project which she intended to introduce, if Miss Mildred proposed, as she probably would, that in consequence of the unexpected turn things had taken, Janet's marriage should be postponed for a short time.

She was right in her conjecture. Miss Mildred had naturally been desirous that, as all arrangements were completed, the wedding should take place as originally intended. Still she felt uneasy respecting her brother. He was in a very precarious condition, and it was absolutely necessary that he should be kept perfectly free from excitement. Even if the unfavourable symptoms did not return, the doctor had said it would be some weeks at least before he would be well enough to move about; and being an elderly man, and not robust, several months would, in all probability, elapse before he recovered entirely from the effects of the attack, which, in his case, had been one of unusual severity.

In this critical state the excitement of his daughter's marriage might prove decidedly injurious; and Miss Mildred, after carefully weighing the matter, had decided to urge upon Mr. Clyde the expediency of deferring the event until nearer the time of his embarkation. But this he steadily resisted. He had powerful motives, though he kept them to himself, for desiring that Janet should be his wife as speedily as possible. And then Mrs. Clyde, who was equally anxious with her son that no delay should occur, brought forward her proposal: it was that the wedding should take place at her house at

Bedesby. There were many advantages, under the circumstances, in such an arrangement, which she did not fail to present to Miss Mildred in the strongest point of view. She urged the case. Miss Mildred considered, hesitated, and finally was persuaded to agree. True, she had reckoned all along on having Janet married from the Priory House, with all the little festivities which should give importance to the event. But this, she was aware, could not be done, nor the wedding guests suitably entertained, without involving considerable commotion in the house. If her brother should suffer in consequence, she should never cease to reproach herself; so, not without many regrets, she relinquished her cherished schemes, and consented that the management of the final arrangements, and the trouble of conducting the wedding, should be transferred to the hands of Mrs. Clyde.

While this conference was going on in the dining-room of the Priory House, Janet, who had started not long before the arrival of Mr. Clyde and his mother, was on her way through the wood to Marton Rectory. Mr.

Clyde had not been mistaken in the conclusions he had drawn from Janet's altered manner. She had for some weeks been slowly awakening to a sense of the true nature of her position; and the sudden and alarming illness of her father had still further shaken her out of the state of listless apathy in which so long she had been plunged. During those three days, when the shadow of death had seemed resting over the house, and she had watched in terror and suspense by the bedside of her father, she had been learning to see more clearly around her. The presence of a near and tangible grief had shown her how unreal, for the most part, had been the web of fancied misery which, in pettish wilfulness, she had woven about herself, shutting out thereby God's sunlight from her soul. Now, as light broke in upon her, she felt dismayed at the toils in which she had entangled herself. What was it she had done? She had promised to marry this Brian Clyde. And then, with fear and trembling, she put the question to her heart, which, if a woman needs to ask at all, already it is answered: Did she love this man, who, next week, if her father's life was spared, would make her his wife?

Did she love him? And through every fibre of her womanhood she felt the shivering whisper run—No. Yet she would have to promise to take him as her own, to take him until death—until death. That was a long word. She must look down the tedious years and see him still beside her. She would be no longer her own, but his, with no power to release herself. And yet he had never made a single pulse thrill with a warmer beat of emotion as she felt her hand in his. She had bent beneath his influence, but it was as the flower bends before the wind, not as it opens its petals to the sun. Yet what could she do? She felt hedged about on every side—there seemed no way of escape. This day week would be their wedding-day. She longed to grasp and stay the hand of Time that was dragging the days so relentlessly over her head. Why had she not thought of it all until it was too late? Should she confess all to Mr. Clyde the next time he came, tell him she found she could not love him with the love a wife should bring to her husband, and ask him even now to free her from her engagement? But dare she do it—she who always felt herself in his presence swaying hither and thither as he moved her, just as the water weeds waved to and fro in the current of the Lyme? Could she, weak and helpless, stand upright and stem the tide? Besides, in her inmost heart she knew it would be useless. He would not be made to swerve from his purpose by such a confession as that. It had not been to gain her affections only that he had drawn her thus mightily to himself. And then, through all the tracks of thought this question pursued her—"Shall I give myself for nought?"

She looked up; her father was sleeping quietly, her aunt just coming on tiptoe into the room with a little plate of jelly in her hand, ready for him when he should awake. She whispered to Janet that she would take her place and bade her, as the day was fine, go down to the village and take back to the rectory a review which Dr. Birney had lent her father just before his illness.

Miss Mildred devised this little errand chiefly for the sake of giving Janet a walk. She had confined herself too closely in her father's room, she thought, and now that he was really recovering, there was no longer any occasion for her to shut herself up day after day, hardly stirring from his side.

Janet made no objection. She got the book and set out, still pondering over the thoughts which had been busying her mind as she sat in her father's room. She longed for counsel, yet knew not where to turn to seek it. She would never have dreamt of confiding her uneasiness to her aunt, and Alison Birney, to whom she might have told it all, was away. She thought of the Canon. He was always good and kind to her. Could she venture to trust her perplexities with him? He would understand her, she knew, if she could but find courage to tell him all. He would know what she ought to do, and whether it would be possible for her, now that the time was so near at hand, to break through all these entanglements, and let Mr. Clyde go away to India without her. How safe she should feel when once he was out of the country; and with that thought she went more lightly along, hardly noticing the summer beauty of the wood or the broad wooded sweep of the park, until, passing through the lodge gate she came out close by the rectory garden.

The Canon was at home in the library, the maid said.

"Do not call him away then, I will go to him," said Janet, as she crossed the hall after the girl. The library, though in reality the Canon's study, was by no means the *sanctum sanctorum* usually implied by the name. "Master's study," in most cases, is a retreat which even the housemaid herself is hardly privileged to invade. I knew an excellent man once, by no means a domestic tyrant either, who would not suffer even his wife to enter without first knocking at the door to request admission. But the Canon's library was the inner home of the rectory household. It was Alison's constant resort,—she used to sit there half the day when her father was at home, and Janet, when she went to the rectory, generally made her way there, and had had many a long talk with her in the deep window seat, while the Canon sat at his table writing, hardly conscious of their presence.

Figure to yourself a tall, grand old man, with a high arched forehead, crag-like head fringed with spare grey locks, an eye keen yet kindly, a face full of charity and repose, and a large, stooping figure clad in a faded crimson dressing-gown, and you see Canon Birney, as Janet saw him when Penelope opened the library door, and ushered her into his presence.

He was busy writing, three or four letters lying ready directed before him, the table littered over with a miscellaneous collection of books, pamphlets, manuscripts, and loose sheets of paper, piled up in apparently promiscuous disorder, though no doubt the Canon himself could have laid his hands in the dark on each separate article as easily as he could on the pockets of his study coat. He looked up over his glasses as Janet entered the room; then seeing who it was, laid down his pen and rose up to greet her.

"Come here, child, and let me look at you," he said, holding out his hands to her. "Do you know how long it is since you were here? Not once since Alison went away, and she has been gone nearly a month. You are getting independent of your old friends, hey?"

"No, indeed," answered Janet, "but we have been so busy, and I was afraid if I came here you might be engaged, and this week papa has been so ill. He is better now, though. Dr. Browne said to-day that he kept improving. Aunt Mildred has sent your book back. She said it would be some time before papa would be able to go on with it, and you might want it yourself. Shall I put it away?" she added, for Janet knew quite well the place of all the new books in the Canon's library.

"Do; and reach down that folio with the lettered back," answered the Canon. "Not that—the one next to it. And now, look here," he continued, opening out carefully a folded plate; "you have never seen this before. I only got it the other week."

Janet uttered a little cry of delight.

"It is the great east window of the cathedral. How beautifully it is tinted! I can tell now what the pictures in the different compartments mean. I never could puzzle them out myself. Some one said once that it was the history of the world from the time of the Creation, but it just seemed to me like a splendid confusion, as if a rainbow had been chopped up and sprinkled all over it."

"Well, now you can study it at your leisure," said the Canon, "if you are not in a hurry to go away. I shall be obliged to finish this letter; it has to go, with these others, by the Indian mail, and it closes to-day. Can you wait awhile?—I shall not be long. The book is too big to carry about, or you should take it home with you. You will find the windows down the nave too—the Crucifixion of Peter, and Christopher among the waves, and the rest."

Janet drew a chair to the table, and began to examine the plates with eager attention. She had so often wanted to know what those old windows were meant to represent, whether some of them really had a story of their own to tell or not. But by-and-bye her thoughts flowed back into their old channel. She was wondering how she should manage to tell the Canon what she wanted to say. It had seemed so much easier when she was walking through the wood than it did now, when she was sitting beside him.

Just then the Canon looked up. He had finished his letter, and was folding it in the envelope. He saw the doubtful, anxious look on Janet's face. There was something behind it all, he felt sure. Perhaps this coming marriage was weighing heavily on her mind. It was a serious thing, he thought, for so young a girl to leave her own country and her father's house, and enter on such a new and untried life, with one so recently a perfect stranger.

"What is it, Janet?" he inquired. "Are you so sorry to leave us all that you are looking so grave?"

"Oh no," said Janet. "It is not that, at least not exactly; only I have been thinking so much lately. Papa has been so ill, and it came into my mind then." She paused; it was so hard to find words to say what she wanted. They all seemed to melt on her lips.

"But, my dear child!" said the Canon, not comprehending her meaning, "you need not make yourself uneasy about him, now that he is recovering. Your aunt Mildred will take good care of him. Besides, we must not have you leave us such a downcast face as this to remember you by."

There was something in the Canon's voice just then, beyond his words, that made Janet feel as if she could trust him now with everything. He was thinking for the moment of a time long ago, of a little bright-haired child, whom he had seen lifted up to kiss the pale wan lips of the young mother who lay a-dying. His own daughter too was motherless, and that had always caused him to feel for Janet an interest even above that which her own winning ways had inspired. But the last words were hardly out of his mouth when there rang through all the house a sudden peal of the front-door bell—a vigorous, decisive summons, as if some one of consequence were waiting for admittance, some one who would not brook delay.

Janet started up. "I must go," she exclaimed; "I am wasting your time sadly. There is some one coming; I heard a carriage driving up."

"Nay, nay, child!" returned the Canon, "don't be so easily frightened away. Perhaps it was a false alarm; and besides, you are not keeping me from anything of importance now. Saturday is always a rest-day with me."

Janet sat down again. She wanted to tell him all, and yet it had been with a hidden sense of relief that she had heard the ring which had put off her avowal. The next moment there was a tap at the library door, followed by Penelope's face, looking somewhat more important than usual.

"You are wanted, sir, please. It's the Dean; he is waiting in the drawing-room."

The Canon nodded. "I am coming directly, Penelope. Good-bye, then, Janet; I shall see you again in a day or two."

Janet looked up in his face. She was not afraid now, in the least. Oh, for one five minutes more!—but it was too late. He was leading her across the hall; there was the Dean's carriage waiting on the gravelled sweep before the door, the harness glittering in the sun, the footman in his sober livery standing beside the horses. She had gone down the steps and seen the Canon turn back from the door. Her visit was over, her doubt unresolved, everything just as it was before.

Why had she been so foolish? Why did she hesitate when he would have listened so kindly to her? And now it was too late. She could have cried with vexation and disappointment, only that would not bring back her lost opportunity. It must all go on now. She could not help herself, and with a sort of desperation she hurried on again past the Hall and through the wood, feeling as if at every step she were crushing down happiness and peace beneath her feet.

"There's Mr. Clyde in the dining-room, Miss Janet, and Mrs. Clyde too. They came just after you went out."

"I am going upstairs, Hannah. I can't come down. Don't say I am come home." And Janet ran softly up to her own room and threw herself down on the window-seat with a sort of sickening apprehension at her heart. She dare not have gone to Mr. Clyde just then. She felt almost as if she had been guilty and deceitful. She was sure if she went to him he would know at once all she had been thinking of. And yet as she sat there, listening nervously for every sound below stairs, again and again the thought went through her mind—Which would be the greater wrong, to marry him, feeling as she did, or to break her promise to him? It was so hard, she thought, to know what was right, harder even than to do it.

She had not been many minutes when her aunt came to fetch her down. Mr. Clyde had seen her from the dining-room window coming in at the gate. She would be obliged now to go.

Slowly she rose and followed her aunt out of the room. There was nothing, however, to alarm her; everything seemed much as usual. Mrs. Clyde came forward to greet her, and then Mr. Clyde drew her aside into the recess of the window and began to talk to her in that low ringing tone that always vibrated through her whole frame, making her feel for the time, whether she would or no, in a sort of subtle unison with himself.

It was nothing very particular that he said—about some place in the Highlands that they were going to visit, and some Tartan ornaments that he had brought her. Yet as he stood holding her hand in that firm velvet clasp, the old sense of being controlled returned to her at once. She almost wondered at her boldness in having even thought of breaking away from him.

Mrs. Clyde was not long before she rose to go. She told Janet of the new arrangement that had been made, and that they all thought, as things were, it would be better on the whole.

Janet made no objection. She was feeling helpless, almost careless, as to what might happen. Since the thing had to be, it made little difference how or where. All places were alike to her.

As Miss Mildred and his mother passed out into the hall, Mr. Clyde drew Janet back for a moment, and stooping down, he kissed her on the forehead. He had done so once before, only once, when he had made her promise to be his wife; and now it seemed as though a second time he were sealing her to be his own.

"Good-bye, Janet," he said; and then in a lowered tone he added, "another week, and this Madeline will be mine."

CHAPTER XXII.

WAS IT A LIE?

IT was the last day of August. The sun rose quietly from behind a grey bank of vapour, which by-and-bye, as the morning broke, fell all away and left him shining bravely over the world. He looked into the dining-room at the Priory House, which was wearing now an unwonted aspect of trim desertion. He peeped through the half-closed blinds into the room above, and there he saw Mr. Brande, sitting propped up with pillows in his bed, and Hannah moving noiselessly about in her clean print gown and chequered apron, attending to his wants. He looked into another sick room far away, where was Canon Birney, with reverent hand closing the eyes of what a moment before had been his sister, while Alison stood weeping by his side. It shone merrily in through the patched window of a bare garret in one of the back lanes of London, burnishing the golden hair of a wan-faced woman, beautiful, young, and poor, who was stitching, as if for life, at a gown of glistening silk. He saw with his broad eye the golden corn-fields round Marton-in-Bedesby, and the tanned reapers sitting under the shadow of the tall stooks, getting their morning "drinking" out of big wooden bottles. He peeped through the chinks of the shutters into the closed rooms of the deserted Hall, turning the motes that danced in his beams into shafts of dazzling light.

He looked, too, into the little dark vestry of the Belfry church at Bedesby, and there he saw Janet Brande, almost hidden in a cloud of floating lace, writing for the last time her old name in the church register, "Janet Brande." She was Brian Clyde's wife now; and Brian Clyde himself stood there, dark and strong and still, and the two bridesmaids, with white gloves and bouquets, their voluminous draperies billowing behind them over a great oaken chest with brazen clasps, that stood in the corner of the vestry. Miss Brande was there too, trying hard to keep an unmoved countenance, and Mrs. Clyde the elder, and the clergyman, a fussy little man in elaborate canonicals, newly come into the living, who had frisked through the service as though it were a pleasant pastime, in which himself, the bride, and bridegroom were performing their respective parts before an admiring audience: There were also several friends of the family who had been present at the ceremony, and who privately thought it was a good thing that Brian Clyde had got "settled" at last.

When the last name had been written in the big heavy book that lay on the vestry table, they all filed out. The little clergyman took off his surplice and hung it up on a peg inside the door of the vestry cupboard; the old clerk was paid, looking furtively afterwards to see how much he had got. The bridal party stepped into their carriages, stared at by a host of dirty children and idle women who had assembled to witness their exit, and drove to the tall house with the steps in the Abbey Close, where Mrs. Clyde resided. And then the wedding guests ate the wedding breakfast, and afterwards Janet went upstairs and put on her travelling dress, and said all her farewells without crying once, which, as the youngest bridesmaid thought, rather spoiled the effect of the whole. And then she and her husband got into Mrs. Clyde's brougham, which drove them through the crooked old streets to the Bedesby station. The Edinburgh train was just about starting. A porter, who was looking sharply round for late passengers, came forward, seized their luggage, and pushed it into the van. Another hurried them into a carriage, and slammed to the door with a tremendous bang. The shrill whistle of the engine smote the air, and with a mighty lurch they were speeding away, —Janet and her husband, side by side, rushing on through the country, together and alone.

Neither of them seemed disposed to talk. The carriage into which they had got happened to be an unusually noisy one; the incessant jar would alone have rendered conversation difficult. Mr. Clyde took off his hat and slung it up under the roof; he put on his travelling cap, reached his arm over the padded cushion between them, and taking Janet's hand firmly in his own, leaned back in the corner of the carriage, as though he had settled himself down for a five hours' ride.

There was no reverence, no tenderness in his action. Perhaps he knew that Janet had none for him, and would not show her what she was not likely to return. It just conveyed to her a sense of his possession in her—a right which none now might dare to dispute—which nothing in the whole world might set aside.

And all that he meant it to imply Janet understood. As they sat there, whirling on past corn-fields and meadows, grey villages, and quiet homesteads, the full extent of all to which she had condemned herself dawned slowly on her. The dull waking stupor in which she had gone through the day was wearing away, and a strange despairing sense of utter weariness of life began to take its place. For a few moments something within her seemed to say, Was there no gate, not out of life alone, but out of existence itself, through which she might pass, and so escape from this too dreary endurance of the burden of being?

Her head was aching violently. She put up her hand to her forehead with a gesture of restless pain. Her husband noticed it.

"Your head aches," he said. "You have overdone yourself with the excitement of the day. Why don't you take things more quietly?"

There was nothing in the words, but somehow there was something in the tone, by which Janet felt herself repelled. She leaned back in her corner and hid her face against the cushion of the carriage. If only he would let her alone, and not speak to her just now.

But he was not going to let her alone. He drew her to him, and held the throbbing head down upon his breast.

"Lie still, little bird," he said, in a quiet, half-mocking tone; "you are fast caged now."

For Janet was shrinking back from him, with an involuntary effort to draw herself away. But her feeble force was like the lapsing of the summer wave upon the rock. No need to resist him now. That brown head had found its lawful resting-place at last.

Yet Janet's heart quailed within her as she felt her husband's arm around her. Her husband! Merciful Heaven! was it, then, a *lie* that she had spoken that morning, as she stood by his side in that gloomy old church, and heard as in a dream the little clergyman pattering out the service in her unlistening ears?

Alas, it was! And now too late she recognised the wrong. Stunned for the time by the blow that had fallen on her, crushing to the ground her girlish hopes, she had suffered herself to be drawn into that sin against her womanhood, so common, alas! that it has almost ceased, in this Christian England of ours, to be regarded as a sin—a marriage unsanctified by love. Dulled and deadened by her grief, she had bound herself over with a sort of numbed indifference to the consequences of her act, in a lifelong subjection to one who had never commanded the allegiance of her soul.

Bitterer tears none shed than the woman, who, roused to consciousness by the galling of her chain, wakes up to the knowledge that in her marriage-bond love is absent, honour an empty word, and that the vow of obedience, which these should have transmuted into a free and glorious service, does but bind her to a servitude more to be dreaded sometimes than death itself.

Such tears, forced unwillingly from her burning eyes, Janet shed now, as she realized, with bitter pangs of self-reproach, how unspeakably more wretched might be a marriage without reverence, than even a life without love.

Yet let us not judge her too severely. She had wronged herself, but she had not deceived her husband also. She had erred grievously, it is true; yet her sin had been light compared with that of many a young lady in modern society, whose one aim being to "settle herself in life," unblushingly barters her maidenhood for an "establishment," and, so that her price be sure, cares not who may be the purchaser.

Janet had not erred thus; she had but suffered herself, knowingly, to be overborne by the persistence of an unrequited passion. Yet, even in that, she had wandered from the safe path of rectitude into one where at every step she must feel her feet sore wounded by the thorns. We may pity, we may excuse, but we cannot justify her. We can but watch her, as she painfully pursues her way, trusting that even through this suffering, self-inflicted though it be, she may rise at length to a nobler, happier, and truer life.

END OF VOL. I.

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